

Bachelor Thesis

in Intercultural Business Management (BA)

Cultural considerations for Germans working with Japanese in virtual teams for project management

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I hereby certify this thesis is my own work and contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, in respect of any other academic award or any other degree. To the best of my knowledge all used sources, information and quotations are referenced as such.

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Abstract

In today's globalized and multinational working world, being part of a team that uses technology in order to cross distance, time zones and even organizations, a so-called virtual team is becoming increasingly common. While extensive research on this topic is available, most of the current research is very theoretical and only in part useful for a member of a virtual team in order to enhance performance. A clear guideline on how to effectively work in an intercultural virtual team is not existent at this point.

This research, aims to produce a clear guideline for Germans working in virtual teams with Japanese in the style of the Project Management Body of Knowledge Guide. Identifying the key challenges of virtual teams and the specific cultural differences of Germans and Japanese, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions model are the starting point for this research. Due to the specificity and the novelty of this research a grounded theory approach has been taken and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 Japanese employees, who regularly work in virtual teams with Germans. Grounded in the experiences and challenges of the participants, the findings help construct a guideline for Germans working with Japanese in virtual teams.

Results are structured according to 4 of the key challenges virtual teams face: trust, communication, leadership and technology/knowledge sharing. The guideline addresses the different communication styles of Japanese and Germans, differences in hierarchical thinking as well as the more collectivistic point of view of many Japanese. The guideline, that has been produced, is intended as a quick guide including recommendations for Germans to enhance their virtual team work with Japanese.

Key Words: virtual team, intercultural project management, PMBOK, Japanese-German relations, cultural dimensions, guideline

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1. Introduction

In today's world, working in a team is a very standard practice. In nearly any company employees work together in teams in order to tackle a certain project or task. With globalization and digitization becoming more and more prevalent this has led to new forms of teams, the so-called virtual teams. Those are teams "with a common purpose that use technology to cross time zones, distance, and the boundaries of organizations" (Lipnack & Stamps, 1999, p.17). While this form of communication and collaboration certainly has a variety of benefits, there are also quite a few challenges that come with it. A variety of authors already identified some of the key issues regarding communication breakdown (Daim, et al., 2012) or leadership (Neeley, 2016), however renowned project management sources like the PMBOK Guide (Project Management Body of Knowledge Guide) (PMI, 2017) do not offer any guideline or strategy for tackling issues related to virtual teams, much less any information on how Germans and Japanese can improve the effectiveness of their virtual team.

The inspiration to do further research and work on the topic of virtual teams came when working at Mercedes-Benz Japan, which regularly worked in virtual teams with Germans. While extensive research on the topic of virtual teams has already been done, the interaction between Germans and Japanese in a virtual team has never been examined before and therefore no guidelines have been established. It was very obvious that many of the team members, while doing the best they could and quite successfully so, were never trained to be part of an intercultural virtual team. A great example is the way that discussions are usually held. Japanese tend to be very polite and focused on preserving harmony in a discussion as well as in general. Germans on the other hand tend to rather say what they think and usually expect others to also just state their honest opinion. This difference leads to quite a few misunderstandings on both parts. Some of the Japanese people perceive the Germans as quite rude or sometimes even authoritative, because they are not used to someone just stating their opinion bluntly. Usually in Japan only managers will do this and even they only do it from time to time. Germans on the other hand sometimes thought the Japanese weren't proficient in the topic, because they did not speak up in the discussion.

While globalization and large international companies did increase the number of scenarios like the one with Japanese and Germans, the number of employees who are trained to deal with such a scenario in an interculturally appropriate way did not increase proportionally. Most of the courses focused on international business do in fact teach intercultural competences to some degree, however only a small portion of the virtual team usually consists of employees with a business background. Usually team members are from various departments like, Engineering, IT, Accounting or Controlling. Those employees mostly have very little training in intercultural awareness. While extensive research in the area of virtual teams has been conducted already and, due to increasing importance of the topic, is still being conducted, the research that has been conducted already is usually more broad and not as close to practice as it is the aim of this thesis. Since there is a clear lack of any form of guideline for Germans working with Japanese in virtual teams, the aim of this thesis is to provide exactly this: a set of guidelines for Germans working in a virtual team with Japanese.

2. Structure of this Paper

As a starting point of this thesis, the first chapter will identify the main benefits of virtual teams. This gives a basis and a reason for the rest of the thesis and explains why this topic needs to be examined in the first place. It is then followed by the literature review section, which consists of the key challenges of virtual teams, a brief definition of project management with an introduction to the PMBOK and an introduction to the cultural dimensions of Hofstede, including an application to German and Japanese culture. The key challenges, which are identified in this chapter, provide the basic categories for the primary research. The applied Hofstede model will mainly be focussed on the Japanese culture, where a few examples from the interviews will be used in order to justify some of the reasoning in this chapter. The next chapter “Methodology” consists of two parts. The first part explains the grounded theory approach to research, which, in an adapted form, was used when interviewing Japanese members of virtual teams with Germans. The second part of this chapter will explain the interview process in detail and illustrate limitations of it. Afterwards the results of the interviews will be presented. At first the answers to each question will be summarized. In the second part of this chapter some of those

answers will be complemented by more general observations that have been made during the interview process. The following chapter “Analysis” will consist of 2 parts. In part one the findings from the interviews will be compared to the key issues of virtual teams and to the cultural differences between Germans and Japanese that have been identified. From this part a guideline in the style of the PMBOK Guide (PMI, 2017) will then be derived in the second part. In the last chapter of this thesis limitations will be highlighted and some recommendations for future research will be given.

3. Benefits of Virtual Teams

When approaching the topic of intercultural considerations for Germans working in virtual teams with Japanese for project management, the first question that might come to mind is: Why do Germans work with Japanese in virtual teams in the first place? Why do they not just manage the project by themselves and let the Japanese manage their projects? One could argue that this is due to multi-national companies and globalization and certainly not be wrong; however there is more to virtual teams than being a mere necessity, a result of globalization. While globalization certainly is an important driving factor for the increasing utilization of virtual teams, this working style offers quite an extensive range of benefits that make it an efficient working style irrespective of globalization.

According to Berry (2011, p.195) “Virtual teams can amplify both the benefits and downsides of traditional teamwork. On the positive side, virtual teams that are designed, managed, and implemented effectively can harness talent and knowledge from anywhere in the world to solve problems and complete work tasks on a 24/7 schedule. However, if these teams are poorly designed and managed, the team dynamic may be weak or even fail”. This statement highlights the importance of adequate management of virtual teams, which is even more vital than in regular co-located teams.

One important benefit of virtual teams is the fact that they “give organizations the ability to bridge time and space (Kanawattanachai & Yoo, cited in Berry, 2011, p.194). This already sums up quite a variety of benefits virtual teams offer. Utilizing them will “drastically reduce travel time and cost” (Bergiel, Bergiel & Balsmeier, 2008,

p.105). Employees of virtual teams are able to work together with other employees from all over the world, without having to travel to a different country. An additional benefit is the fact, that “Virtual teams can follow the sun and utilize 24-hour work schedules with electronic communication, simply because different parts of the team in different parts of the world can work on various team tasks at different times” (Solomon, 2001, cited in Berry, 2011, p.194). According to Johnson, Heimann, & O’Neill (2001, p.26) virtual teams can also support “cross-functional and cross-divisional interaction”, because virtual teams bridge physical as well as organisational distances between different parts of an organisation. “Performance is often easier to document and review in virtual teams because most interactions, commitments, and outcomes are archived automatically and electronically” (Gibson & Cohen, 2003, cited in Berry, 2011, p.194). This firstly makes it easier to keep track of any progress and secondly enables all participants of the team to access this data. As can be seen from this quite extensive list of benefits there is quite a lot of merit to utilizing virtual teams, however this sort of team also comes with quite a few challenges, which will be further explained in the next section.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Key Challenges of Virtual Teams

In order to being able to do further research and especially primary research on the topic of virtual teams between Japanese and Germans the researcher first needs to familiarize themselves with some general key challenges of virtual teams. According to Oertig & Buergi “the leadership challenge, virtual aspects of communication and developing trust” (2006, p.24) are the most significant challenges in virtual teams. In their book about creating conditions for virtual team effectiveness, Gibson and Cohen (2003) address the same challenges; however they add the challenge of implementing information technology and information sharing. Additionally the main issues, which were observed during the „Find your GVT Rhythm!“ project that was initiated by Hale (2018) were “Technology, Leadership, Alignment and Trust” (ibid.), which are very similar to the aforementioned key challenges. As part of this thesis the following 4 key challenges of virtual teams will be examined: Trust, Communication, Leadership and Technology/Information Sharing.

4.1.1 Trust

According to Pinjani & Palvia “trust in a team context has been defined as the degree of confidence of team members in one another” (2013, p.145). “Trust is important in any type of team, but is a critical enabling condition in virtual teams” (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner, 1998, cited in Gibson & Manuel, 2003, p.5). The greatest difficulty with trust in virtual teams is the fact that trust in a virtual team setting is a lot more difficult to gain and identify, but simultaneously, due to the geographical dispersion, it might be even more important than in co-located teams (ibid.). Lipnack and Stamps (1997, cited in Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002, p.188) even go one step further and “suggest that the success and failure of virtual teams is primarily contingent upon trust”. Another point that is made by Pinjani & Palvia (2013, p.145) states that “trust and team performance are apparently positively correlated with effective communication among members”, which transitions into the next key challenge: Communication.

4.1.2 Communication

Communication can be defined as “the process of transferring information, meaning and understanding from sender to receiver” (Gibson, 1996, cited in Gibson & Manuel, 2003, p.17). As already briefly mentioned in the section about trust, “communication processes are the key underlying mechanisms for establishing trust” (ibid., p.18). There are, however, two major challenges that effective communication in virtual teams faces: multi-cultural team-members and lack of nonverbal communication and according to Staples & Zhao (cited in Chhay & Kleiner, 2013, p.29) “negative aspects of team diversity include communication difficulties, misunderstandings, decreased cohesion and increased conflict”. Gibson & Manuel (2003, p.20) concisely state, that “the greater the cultural differences between sender and receiver, the greater the expected difficulty in communicating”. According to Daim et al. (2012, p.203), cultural differences “manifest themselves in three major categories: the functional disciplines of the members of the group, the organizational structure of the company and, the nationalities of the group members”.

In order to counteract the lack of nonverbal communication in a virtual team setting Chhay & Kleiner (2013, p.30) suggest, that “virtual team members must communicate explicitly, clearly, concisely and quickly to avoid frustration”. Furthermore “Web conferences and teleconferences can help add nonverbal cues of posture and tone to team communication” (ibid.).

4.1.3 Leadership

According to Bell & Kozlowski (2002, cited in Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p.91) “there are the two primary leadership functions in virtual teams: performance management and team development”. The challenge for the leader is the fact that monitoring performance, mentoring and coaching of team members is very difficult, due to a lack of face-to-face time (ibid.). Bell & Kozlowski (2002, p.26), however, argue that since the team members of a virtual team are usually chosen for their “expertise and competence [...], the need for virtual team leaders to monitor or develop team members may not be as crucial”. Neeley (2016) created a guideline for virtual team leaders by managing the team according to the acronym SPLIT (Structure, Process, Language, Identity, and Technology). He identifies 2 important principles as a virtual team leader: managing the pervasive social distance and the role of the team leader as a cyclical one instead of a linear one, since “problems and patterns may repeat themselves as teams shift, disband, and regroup” (ibid., p.12)

4.1.4 Technology/Information sharing

Sivunen & Valo (2006, p.65) found that a virtual team’s “technology choice is based on four different factors: accessibility, social distance, idea sharing, and informing”, with the first two factors being person-related factors and the latter two being task-related factors. Shachaf (2008, p.139) in their exploratory study on cultural diversity and information and communication technology impacts on global virtual teams found, that “information and communication technologies mitigated the negative impact of cultural diversity on team effectiveness while supporting the positive impact”. Workman, Kahnweiler & Bommer (2003, cited in Pinjani & Palvia, 2013,

p.145) found a strong positive impact of media richness on various aspects of the virtual team, it “has been found to impact team effectiveness, efficiency, level of communication, relationships among team members, and team commitment”. Those examples underline the great importance of adequate technology and information sharing processes within virtual teams in order to foster team performance. Moreover technology does not only impact team performance positively but also has a positive impact on other challenges of virtual teams such as communication and can even mitigate some of the difficulties that arise from cultural differences and spatial dispersion.

4.2 Project Management/PMBOK

According to the Project Management Institute, “Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements” (PMI, 2017, p.6). The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) is defined by the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2017) as “a term that describes the knowledge within the profession of project management”. Since no single book can contain the whole PMBOK the PMI released “A guide to the project management body of knowledge: (PMBOK guide)” (PMI, 2017). It contains the central categories of project management. When doing research on the project management area, it has quickly become clear, that there is no guideline on intercultural project management, let alone intercultural project management for Germans working in virtual teams with Japanese. Even the recently released “Agile Practice Guide” (PMI, 2018) does not feature any chapter on intercultural project management. The goal was therefore to start filling this gap and create a guideline for Germans working with Japanese in virtual teams. Since the main reason for utilizing virtual teams, usually is to manage a project, an additional section regarding virtual teams and effective implementation of such, would be a helpful addition to the PMBOK.

4.3 Cultural differences between Germans and Japanese (based on Hofstede model)

In order to be able to compare German and Japanese culture, first of all the concept of culture has to be defined. Hofstede (1984, p.21) defines culture as “the collective

programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another". According to Jones (2007, p.3) culture "is a slow process of growing into a society. It includes: learning values, partaking of rituals, modelling against heroes and understanding symbols". In the following paragraph the Country comparison tool of the Hofstede Insights (2001) website, which is based on the findings of Geert Hofstede, will be used to categorize German culture and Japanese culture based on the 6 dimensions model. According to Hofstede Insights (ibid.) the 6 dimensions consist of and can be defined as the following:

- **"Power Distance** is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally."
- **"Individualism [...]** is the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members.
- **"Masculinity:** The fundamental issue here is what motivates people, wanting to be the best (Masculine) or liking what you do (Feminine)."
- **"Uncertainty avoidance** has to do with the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen?"
- **"Long term orientation** describes how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future."
- **"Indulgence:** the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses."

In his initial book Hofstede (1984) identified 4 cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. Several years later he added the fifth dimension of long term orientation to his book "Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations" (Hofstede, 2001). Finally in 2010 the sixth dimension was added (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). "While the level of controversy surrounding [Hofstede's] work is still quite high, it remains the most valuable piece of work on culture for both scholars and practitioners." (Jones, 2007, p.7) Another large scale research on different cultures in 62 societies around the world, where around 17.000 mid-level managers have been surveyed, has been conducted by the GLOBE foundation in 2004 (House, 2004).

While this research is more recent than Hofstede's research, it still shows a great amount of similarities to the dimensions of Hofstede. The GLOBE study features 18 different cultural dimensions, where uncertainty avoidance and power distance are used in both studies and most of the other dimensions are adapted from Hofstede's dimensions or split one dimension of Hofstede into several dimensions (Venaik & Brewer, 2008, pp. 6-7). Hofstede himself argues, that "the study's total of 18 dimensions are unnecessary and lack parsimony" (Hofstede, cited in *ibid.*). Due to the many similarities between the two models and the greater conciseness of the Hofstede model, this model will be used as the basis of the following cultural analysis. One might criticise this approach, comparing the German and Japanese culture solely based on this one model, however, the model, while being old, has adapted over time (as shown above) and remains the most influential model on cross-cultural research. So as a first step both German (shortly) and Japanese culture are going to be categorized according to the 6 dimensions model (Hofstede Insights, 2001) and as a second step the two cultures will be compared and findings from the interviews will be added. The description of German culture based on the 6 dimensions is relatively short since it mainly serves as comparison to identify differences and similarities to the Japanese culture. Some of the answers from interview participants have already been used to support findings about Japanese culture. This is in order to give more weight to the results, which are mainly based on Hofstede Insights (*ibid.*), by adding a second source. Before starting to describe the Japanese and the German culture according to Hofstede Insights (*ibid.*) and the interview findings, it has to be made clear that this is a generalisation. Japanese or German people from a cultural point of view tend to behave in this way. This does not mean that every Japanese or German person will definitely behave exactly the way it is described in this chapter and in the analysis later.

4.3.1 German Culture

- **Power distance:** Germany is "highly decentralised" and a "direct and participative communication and meeting style is common" (*ibid.*)
- **Individualism:** "German society is a truly individualist one [...] loyalty is based on personal preferences" and "communication is the most direct in the world" (*ibid.*)

- **Masculinity:** “Germany is considered a Masculine society. Performance is highly valued [...], people draw a lot of self-esteem from their tasks [...] status is often shown” (ibid.)
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** “Germany is among the uncertainty avoidant countries. [...] There is a strong preference for deductive rather than inductive approaches [...] this is also reflected by the law system” (ibid.).
- **Long term orientation:** “Germany [...] is a pragmatic country. [...] They show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions” (ibid.).
- **Indulgence:** “German culture is restrained in nature. [...] People [...] have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms” (ibid.).

4.3.2 Japanese Culture

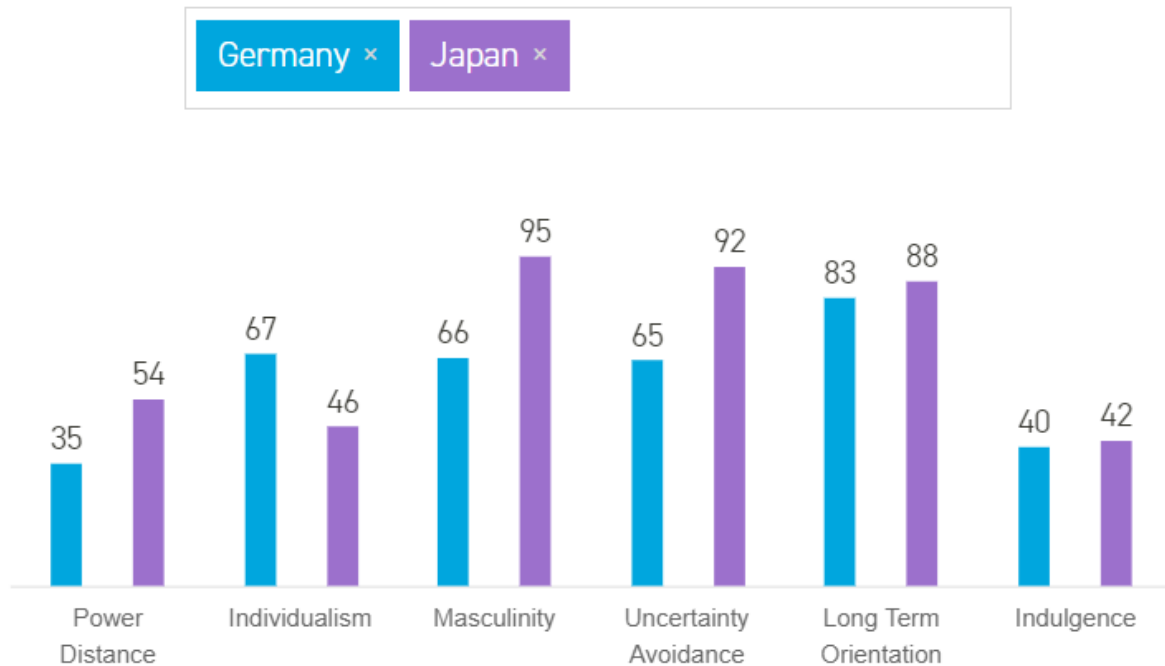
- **Power distance:** In this dimension Japan is somewhat in the middle. Japanese on the one hand “are always conscious of their hierarchical position” and “all decisions must be confirmed by each hierarchical layer” (ibid.). This strengthens the findings from Interview 11 for example, where Japan was described as “hierarchy based”. On the other hand this example exactly shows that there is “no one top guy who can take decision like in more hierarchical societies” (ibid.). What is more, “there is a strong notion in the Japanese education system that everybody is born equal and anyone can get ahead and become anything” (ibid.)
- **Individualism:** “Japanese society shows many of the characteristics of a collectivistic society: such as putting harmony of group above the expression of individual opinions” (ibid.). This could be observed quite strongly in almost all the interviews when the participants were asked, what they did after a Telco with their virtual team. Almost all of them answered that they will align with the others to ensure everyone got the same understanding and is on the same page. However, Japan is not as collectivistic as most other Asian countries, “Japanese society does not have extended family system which forms a base of more collectivistic societies such as China and Korea” (ibid.).
- **Masculinity:** “Japan is one of the most Masculine societies in the world”, however in combination with the “mild collectivism” one does not observe the

“assertive and competitive individual behaviours which we often associate with Masculine culture” (ibid.) the only competitive behaviour that can be observed is competitive behaviour between groups.

- **Uncertainty avoidance:** “Japan is one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries on earth [...] in Japan anything you do is prescribed for maximum predictability” (ibid.). One example of this could also be found in the interviews, where several participants, when asked about their preferred communication method, answered they prefer email, because misunderstandings can be avoided, it can be documented better and they have proof afterwards.
- **Long term orientation:** Japan is very long-term oriented. “Japanese see their life as a very short moment in a long history of mankind [...] and companies are not here to make money every quarter for the shareholders, but to serve the stake holders and society at large for many generations to come” (ibid.).
- **Indulgence:** Most Japanese “have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong” (ibid.). This tendency has been shown among all participants of the interviews to some extent. Japanese were often described as shy and it was often stated that a respectful behaviour was valued quite highly.

4.3.3 Comparison

In the following part German and Japanese culture will be compared based on the findings above. One of the benefits from this comparison is that significant cultural differences can be identified and can later be focused on in the creation of a guideline for Germans, who work in a virtual team with Japanese, whereas cultural similarities can be omitted. In the following figure the scores of both countries for each of the categories can be seen.



Hofstede Insights, (2019), Country Comparison Germany - Japan [ONLINE]. Available at: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/germany,japan/> [Last accessed 21 February 2019].

Both Japan and Germany are long-term oriented cultures. In Japan this can be seen in the “constantly high rate of investment in R&D even in economically difficult times” (ibid.). Germany is very pragmatic and efficiency and “achieving results” tends to be more valued than keeping traditions alive.

Another similarity is the indulgence category. With an almost equal score, both Germany and Japan are very restraint countries. Both countries highly value social norms and tend to follow them without indulging themselves (ibid.).

When it comes to power distance Germany is among the countries with a very low power distance, whereas Japan is somewhat in the middle. A perfect example for this is the different communication style, especially with higher ranked persons. In Germany people communicate very directly, while in Japan usually the manager shows an opinion and then the employees follow (Interview 4).

The fact that Japanese tend to be more collectivistic than Germans is also supported by the interview results. It was mentioned during the interviews that alignment after Telcos is very important, but also that Japanese consider how others feel about an action before executing it (e.g. Interview 9).

The high masculinity level of Japanese can be identified in a variety of different examples. During the stay in a Japanese company the researcher observed, that it was not uncommon for Japanese to work until late in the evening. Also during the interviews one participant mentioned that they were astonished by the amount of holiday Germans have (Interview 7).

While there is a difference in the level of uncertainty avoidance between Japanese and Germans, both of them tend to try and avoid uncertainty. While in Germany there is an extensive set of laws for almost anything, Japan also has a standard procedure or a standard code of conduct for a variety of everyday situations (ibid.). This also shows in the results of the interviews where almost all participants said they prepared for a Telco by going through the agenda and preparing questions and necessary material. In some cases Japanese expected more detailed answers and explanations for decisions. The slightly higher level of uncertainty avoidance among Japanese can for example be seen in one answer of the interviews, where the participant gives an example about cutting budget where the Germans give a brief justification, however Japanese management expects a more detailed explanation for an important topic like this (Interview 3).

To sum it up with regards to long term orientation and indulgence Japan and Germany are very similar. For uncertainty avoidance they tend to behave in a similar manner, however, there are a few differences. The dimensions of power distance, individualism and masculinity show the greatest differences between the two cultures.

5. Methodology

5.1 Grounded Theory Approach

In order to examine the key challenges that Germans face when working in a virtual team with Japanese it did not seem satisfactory to base those challenges solely on literature. An approach that was closer to the practical side seemed more appropriate and would emphasize the practical usefulness of this research. The aim was also to examine challenges that are specific to the interaction between Germans and Japanese in virtual teams to be able to later compare them to some recurring more

general key challenges of virtual teams. A quantitative research approach was ruled out from the beginning in order to avoid bias by imposing ideas on participants. Interviews were the chosen method of data-collection. The aim was to avoid any form of bias as much as possible and to get the unaltered perception of the participants on the topic. Semi-structured interviews among Japanese participants of virtual teams with Germans seemed the best format to gain an unbiased response. The interviews were conducted among Japanese in order to avoid German bias and examine how Germans are perceived by the Japanese in order to then base the guidelines on these findings. Further details on the interview execution will be explained in the primary research section.

Since the research is very much focused on producing a practical guideline for Germans on the specific interactions between Germans and Japanese in virtual teams, a hypothesis-driven research approach was not deemed suitable for two main reasons. The first one being the fact that the researcher is German and already has work experience with Japanese which would lead to biased hypotheses and therefore falsify any research results. Secondly while living in Japan the researcher has already constructed own ideas about Japanese culture and behaviour, which would bias any hypothesis that could be established. It was therefore necessary for the research to be mainly based on the interview findings themselves and to inductively generate theories based from the findings. This can only be achieved by employing a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory can be defined as “analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area” (Glaser, 1992, p.16). One of the main benefits of grounded theory is that it “is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses” (Glaser & Strauss 2017, p.3), which is very much in the interest of the researcher. By basing the theory in the data gathered from the interviews it was ensured that the perception of Germans by Japanese would be as unbiased as possible and the experiences of the Japanese virtual team members would be reflected appropriately when generating theory and, later, guidelines based on them.

In the primary research part there will be additional information on the design and execution of the interviews and interview questions. This part is defining the specific type of grounded theory this research is opting for and gives reasoning as to why the chosen type is most fitting. Originally the grounded theory method was designed by

Glaser and Strauss in a way that it “invited their readers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Charmaz, 2006, p.9). Based on this, over the years a variety of different grounded theory approaches emerged, with the main ones being constructivist grounded theory and the classical grounded theory approach by Glaser and Strauss.

The classical grounded theory approach aims to “suspend intuition/preconceptions and uncover what is found in the data, that is, what the data are indicating/disclosing (data-driven)” (Hernandez & Andrews, 2012, p.62). With regards to literature review as part of the classical approach “Glaser advises researchers to delay the review of the literature so as not to be unduly influenced by it” (Glaser, 1992, cited in Hernandez & Andrews, 2012, p.60), whereas “constructivist grounded theory begins with a review of the literature which is necessary to find out what has been done and not been done in an area” (ibid.). The fact that the interviewer already did a literature review before conducting interviews in order to familiarize themselves with the topic and find out about key challenges of virtual teams in general in order to have a basic knowledge for creating the interview questions, would disqualify the research from being a classical grounded theory approach. Acknowledging this the researcher focused on the constructivist grounded theory approach to execute the research.

The constructivist grounded theory approach according to Charmaz (2006, p.10) is an approach in which “we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices.” In this case the researcher already identified key challenges of virtual teams and then used this knowledge in order to formulate open questions for the interview participants that include those challenges or parts of those challenges and try to gain the perspective of the Japanese interview participants on those challenges. This approach according to Hernandez and Andrews (2012, p.62) is “researcher-driven” and is to a large extent based on the researchers interpretation of the data. This acknowledges the fact that the researcher is not fully objective and perceives and also interprets the data based on their own experience and background knowledge. While this is definitely the case in this research, when trying to find similarities within the data and during the general coding phase the researcher tries to remain as objective as possible and let the data speak for itself in order to avoid the research to be completely researcher driven and therefore not objective.

With regards to this the research should be data-driven and based on what can be derived from the data by coding. The bias in this case happens earlier when asking the participants about their experience with regards to some of the general challenges of virtual teams and not just asking about the general experience of the participants. In the constructivist approach “meaning is constructed through the qualitative researcher’s interpretive understandings” (Charmaz, 2009, cited in Hernandez & Andrews, 2012, p.60) Using the constructivist grounded theory approach the researcher usually starts “with specific questions on a particular substantive area” (Hernandez & Andrews 2012, cited in Evans, 2013, p.45). This is given in this research, because from the beginning the aim of this research was to find out about specific issues of Japanese working together with Germans in virtual teams based on general challenges of virtual teams. The approach was **not** to generally ask Japanese about their work with Germans in virtual teams and what comes to their mind when thinking about it but to interview based on the researcher’s experience working in Japan and also with the main aim to identify issues in order to compare with general challenges and later with cultural differences with the ultimate goal to find ways to resolve those issues and provide a set of guidelines for Germans in order to prevent the issues in the first place.

Since the researcher identified the key challenges and concepts they would ask the interview participants about, the next decision that needed to be made was how the data gathered from interviews should be saved and examined. Charmaz (2006, p.69) acknowledges that some researchers take notes instead of fully transcribing interviews, in order to shorten the process, and avoid data overload. This however makes several dangerous assumptions. It assumes the interviewer will note the most “telling material and record it well” (ibid.) and it also assumes that the notes taken capture the personal views of participants. Since this cannot be guaranteed even for experienced researchers (ibid.) and a fragmentary note-taking might be detrimental for the objectivity and inductive approach of the research, the researcher decided to fully record and transcribe the interviews.

Usually as part of the constructivist grounded theory approach there are 3 stages of coding: line-by-line coding, focused coding and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 42ff). However, since the structure of the interview is based on the key challenges in virtual teams, a later line-by-line coding, meaning “naming each line of

your written data” (Glaser, 1978, cited in Charmaz, 2006, p.50) in order to find similarities is not necessary. Instead the approach was adapted in a way that results were grouped by participant and question. In order to avoid putting words in the mouth of interview participants during the whole coding process the complete answers to the specific questions are taken into account at any point during the coding phase. From those grouped results the analysis can then proceed to the focused coding stage, which includes “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes” (Charmaz, 2006, p.57). Further details on the preparation and execution of the interviews, the grouping and derivation of results from the interviews as well as possible limitations will be discussed in the following section.

5.2 Interviews

Since the aim was to establish guidelines for the Germans to improve virtual team collaboration with Japanese, it was evident to conduct primary research on the Japanese side. Not only does this avoid bias by the Germans in how they perceive themselves when working in a virtual team with Japanese, but it also focuses on issues that emerge in this setting from a Japanese point of view and even possible solutions offered by the Japanese interviewees. This makes it easier to derive suitable solutions and guidelines for the German side and brings to attention Japanese specific topics that Germans might need to be aware of. The interviews have been conducted at Mercedes-Benz Japan, which is a fully owned subsidiary of Daimler AG.

5.2.1 Designing Interview Questions

The set of questions that was used for the interviews can be found in Appendix A. As already mentioned, after the initial literature review, the main aim for the interviews was to identify the specific challenges and problem Japanese virtual team members face when interacting with Germans. The interview style can be categorized as a standardized open-ended interview (Turner, 2010, p.756). In this type of interview “participants are always asked identical questions, but the questions are worded so

that responses are open-ended” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, cited in *ibid.*). The questions are based on the general challenges virtual teams face. Generally the questions become more and more open during the interview.

In total the interview consists of 13 questions. The first question is about frequency and reason of virtual team meetings. The next 4 questions are about preparation, misunderstandings of Germans and Japanese and the general procedure after virtual team meetings. The following question is about the idea of leadership, followed by a question about Japan specific processes and procedures, preferred communication methods and trust building. The last 3 questions are the ones which are the most open and not necessarily directly related to virtual teams, with the first one asking about what the researcher might be blind to in Japan, mostly aiming at cultural conventions. The second one is about questions they think the researcher should ask and the last one asking about any additional input they might have for this topic.

By designing the interview in this way objectivity is preserved as much as possible, due to the open questions and by giving participants the possibility to talk about their experiences freely. However, by implementing the key challenges of virtual teams in the questions, there is some sort of guidance to it that also makes it easier to evaluate the data and to find commonalities.

5.2.2 Conducting Interviews

During an internship of 5 months in Mercedes-Benz Japan in Tokyo the researcher used a criterion sampling method (Miles & Huberman, 1994, cited in Creswell, 2007, p.159) to look for employees from any department with the criterion being that they were experienced in working with Germans in virtual teams. Finally 21 employees who met the criterion were identified. The employees were of different age and gender and from a variety of different departments. For the employees who agreed to participate in the interview the researcher appointed a time slot for the interview that fit their schedule and conducted the interview.

The challenge for the interviewer was firstly to schedule the interviews during the regular working days with employees who mostly had a busy schedule. Secondly,

while all employees were able to speak English, the level varied greatly. Sometimes some of the questions had to be put in simpler words or in a way had to be paraphrased. The challenge here was to phrase the question in a way that makes the employee understand, but not change, the meaning of the question. However, in some cases insightful answers even originated from misunderstandings.

The process of the interview was very straight forward. In the beginning participants were thanked for sharing their experience and they were asked if they agreed to the interviewer voice recording the interview, which thankfully all of them agreed to. They were then also assured that the interview will later be anonymized and the finished thesis will be provided to their organisation, so they can also benefit from the findings. Then the questions were asked and, if there were any misunderstandings or general problems with understanding the question, the question was paraphrased or explained by the interviewer. The participants were not interrupted or pressed for time, even if their answer was not related to the question. This ensured that participants could express their experience as freely as possible. If the answer was not related to the question, however, the question was then paraphrased or explained in order to also obtain an answer to the original question.

5.2.3 Structuring and Grouping Results

As mentioned in the Grounded Theory section, line-by-line coding was avoided, due to the structure of the interview questions, which were already based on key challenges people face in virtual teams. Charmaz, when talking about line-by-line coding states that “initial codes help you separate data into categories” (2006, p.51) However, since the researcher already identified main categories he was interested in, when designing the interview questions, therefore a coding based on the questions seemed a logical conclusion. The table in Appendix C shows the summed up interview answers of all participants. In order to retain objectivity, the researcher, however, remained open for new virtual team challenges that might emerge from the data. Based on the question-by-question grouping, the key challenges that Japanese face when working in a virtual team with Germans can then be identified in the focused coding stage.

5.2.4 Limitations

While the constructivist grounded theory approach for this research is a very suitable approach, it still has a few limitations that will be discussed in the following. First of all, because the result of this research should be a guideline for Germans working with Japanese in virtual teams, some presumption and categorization had to take place before the start of the interview phase, primarily to give some sort of structure, but also to ensure that the quality of the data is suitable for producing a guideline. Therefore the usual constructivist approach had to be adapted to have some categories for which answers are sought from the interviewees. In order to avoid a strong researcher bias the researcher remained open for new categories that might emerge from the data and during the coding stage used the words of the participants as much as possible in order to avoid too much interpretation. While it is time consuming to always consider the full answer of the participants, the relatively small sample size makes it possible and for the sake of objectivity it is definitely beneficial.

In order to avoid data-overload the interview process was stopped after 12 interviews where the “interviews led to more of the same type of data and a saturation point is reached” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Gubrium, J. F., Holstein, et Al., 2012, p.229).

Finally there is also the general limitation of any research that includes grounded theory. As Charmaz (2006) and Glaser (1992) described, in both of their respective types of grounded theory the results of the research are only theory and not scientifically proven in some way.

6. Interview Results

In this section, the researcher sums up and highlights important findings from the interviews. In the first part the results from the interviews themselves will be summed up, sorted by question. The second part will focus on general observations of interesting behaviour of Japanese employees around the interview process and during everyday working.

6.1 Answers to Interview Questions

The interview participants are all employees of Mercedes-Benz Japan and worked in different departments of the company. All of them have, to a varying extent, experience in working in virtual teams with Germans. The frequency of participation in a virtual team with Germans among the interviewees ranges from daily to monthly, with most of them having regular Telcos with their teams. The most prevalent reasons for the virtual teams are reporting back to headquarters and the implementation of a project in Japan where they get expertise from German colleagues. Since the interviewed employees work in many different departments there is also a range of other reasons for their respective virtual teams in project management.

When it comes to preparing for a Telco, the answers of the participants have been pretty similar. Almost all of them, depending on their position in the team, prepare or check the agenda and summarize questions or issues they want to address during the Telco.

The most common issues that arise during Telcos are language issues. However, quite a few other interesting issues have been addressed by interviewees. The different organisation of the company was mentioned quite a few times, referring to the different sizes of Mercedes-Benz Japan and the headquarters and the different distribution of responsibilities that come with it. Another difference that sometimes leads to misunderstandings is the different communication style of Germans and Japanese. Some employees mentioned the more direct communication style of Germans and one employee referred to this as the Germans being strict with their wording and attitude. Another employee mentioned the extensive use of abbreviations for technical terms which the employee did not know about.

After a Telco almost all participants mentioned a process of alignment that takes place among the Japanese colleagues. Usually once the Telco is over all Japanese colleagues stay and discuss what was talked about in the Telco in order to ensure everyone got the same understanding.

Regarding the preferred communication method, there was no clear answer. Most of the participants stated that their preferred communication method depends on the

issue that is being discussed. Two participants mentioned that for important issues or decisions they prefer Telcos and for general conversation they prefer email due to less organisational effort. The benefit of having evidence or being able to document emails or short messages was also mentioned a few times.

When asked about leadership in virtual teams the responses were surprisingly similar among the participants. Most of them value if everyone's opinion is asked by the leader. The leader should be more of a "moderator" (Interview 6) or a "facilitator" (Interview 9). It was also mentioned a few times, that, if possible, the team should meet face to face at least once in the beginning. For every meeting it should also be clear why this meeting is held.

With regards to the different company processes and procedures in Japan one behaviour that was mentioned quite a few times is that Japanese people, if there is an important meeting or decision, usually meet before the meeting (sometimes for a dinner) to discuss and decide on the issue and only after everyone is aligned, the meeting is held where the decision is made official. The different organisational structure, which was mentioned before, is also a difference that is being mentioned again here. There are some other processes that are mentioned, but those are usually specific to the respective department of the participant.

In order to gain trust of Japanese colleagues the participants mentioned respect as an important trait. Respecting the Japanese culture and especially the colleagues is an important factor. Addressing Japanese colleagues with the title –san after their name is valued a lot by Japanese people. Moreover it was mentioned a few times, that when being a new colleague, one should hear about the opinion of the others first and then state the own opinion.

When asked about what the researcher may be blind to in Japan most people mentioned the Japanese politeness and respectfulness. One participant explained the concept, which he called "sasuru". The concept refers to thinking about the other people's mind and understanding what other people prefer only from the atmosphere. It was also mentioned a few times that Japanese people tend to be very indirect and shy, which is also closely tied to being polite and respectful.

For the last two open questions some information that can be linked to information already gathered was given. One participant again mentioned the concept, where

before doing something you should consider how it affects other people. The fact, that Japanese people don't like to cut in during a discussion, which was mentioned by another participant, is also closely linked to the culture of being polite and respectful. A few participants were interested in the other way round (interviewing Germans about this topic) or even in the personal opinion of the researcher on some of the questions. Another cultural difference was also mentioned by one participant, regarding the sense of individuality in the different cultures. They said "In Germany it is individual and public and in Japan it is family and others." (Interview 9)

6.2 General Interview Observations

There was a Japanese behaviour, which could be observed during the organisation stage of the interviews. As already mentioned, in the beginning the researcher identified potential interview candidates by finding out, which candidate had experience in working with Germans in a virtual team. After the relevant candidates have been identified, the researcher sent out an email explaining the topic of the thesis and giving a brief definition of virtual teams in order for the employees, to know what the topic consists of. In the email they were also asked to, if possible, take part in a short 15 – 25min interview on this topic, to share their experience with the researcher. In the beginning not a single employee responded to this email. While a fairly low initial response rate was somewhat expected, a response rate of 0 was a result that was not at all anticipated by the researcher. When working at Mercedes-Benz Japan, the researcher was working closely together with a manager, who was also the manager of a lot of the employees that have previously been contacted by the researcher via email. The researcher proceeded to ask the manager, why nobody replied to the email, when the answer of the manager was, that such kind of behaviour was normal in Japan (without any further explanation). The manager, however, assured the researcher, that during the next department meeting they would make sure to address this topic and ask employees to support. After the department meeting where the manager told the employees to support the researcher, within 2 days every single employee from this department, who has been contacted previously via email, agreed to an interview. What was even more astounding was the fact that they were all very keen to share their experience and

did not only begrudgingly take part in the interview as was expected from the German viewpoint of the researcher.

Another behaviour, that stood out during the interviewing process, because it seemed quite atypical for an interview, was the fact that one participant wanted to see the interview questions on the screen in the meeting room, where the interview took place. The researcher basically asked the questions and before answering any of the questions the participant read the question on the screen again and then answered the question.

When scheduling the interviews, the planned location for the interview always was the break area of the office. There were a few tables and you could get coffee and tea. This area was often used for informal meetings or just general conversation among employees. Since the researcher wanted the atmosphere during the interview to be relaxed and more casual, this area seemed like the best location to conduct the interviews. However, 7 of the 12 participants suggested conducting the interview in a private meeting or conference room. Some of them said they would prefer the interview in an undisturbed environment. Others mentioned they do not want to disturb their colleagues in the office.

A behaviour that could be observed among a few interview participants was that some of them were interested in the researcher's opinion on some or even all of the topics mentioned in the interview. Some participants asked about this at the end of the interview; however it also sometimes came up during the interview that after a question the participant asked the researcher about their opinion on the topic. It also did not appear as small talk or "being nice" it seemed as if they were genuinely interested in the opinion of the researcher.

7. Analysis

7.1 Comparing general issues of VTs and cultural differences with interview findings

As a first part of the analysis the findings on the key issues of virtual teams and the cultural differences will be compared with the results from the interviews. The goal is

to specify the general issues of virtual teams and identify the specific issues of virtual teams between Germans and Japanese.

7.1.1 Trust

As identified earlier in the literature review, the greatest difficulty with trust in virtual teams is the fact that trust in a virtual team setting is a lot more difficult to gain and identify, but simultaneously, due to the geographical dispersion, it might be even more important than in co-located teams (Gibson & Manuel, 2003, p.5). Trust is definitely one of the most important challenges that virtual teams have to overcome in order to be successful. It was also identified as a critical enabler of effective communication among team members (Pinjani & Palvia, 2013, p.145). The great issue with gaining trust from Japanese people is the fact, that it usually takes quite some time. Time that a team member during a fast pace project in a virtual team probably does not have. When conducting the interview and asking participants how a new German team member could earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues quickly, the first response of the participants often was to laugh, because it is very difficult to do quickly. Japanese usually trust people they know for a long time and have dealt with on various occasions. This might be also one of the main reasons for Japanese to regularly go out for dinner or to a bar with colleagues and other people they work with. They prefer to also get to know people they work with on a more private and personal level. One participant of the interview mentioned in order to gain trust of Japanese people you should go drinking with them and have more private conversations. From the experience of the researcher this is a much underrated advice, which came up only once during the interview because most Japanese people would probably never straight up tell someone in order to gain their trust you should go drinking with them. It was also mentioned a second time in a slightly different manner, where one participant told the researcher about their experience, that Germans separate work and life quite strictly, which they found surprising. They stated that Germans really don't talk much about their emotions or feelings and how they generally feel about certain things, even in a more private setting. This way of gaining and building trust is also supported by the observations of the researcher. During the stay in Japan the department had a regular (usually

monthly) after work meeting where they would all go have dinner together and talk to each other about more private topics. This is further supported by the interview answers, where several participants highlighted the importance and positive effects on a virtual team to meet face to face at least once. A face to face meeting presents the unique opportunity to get to know someone more personally and being able to connect the voice that can be heard during Telcos to a face. This can have a great effect on trust.

Some participants mentioned the importance of hearing about other's opinion first before sharing the own opinion when being new to a team. This, on the one hand, has something to do with respect, which is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, but also with the fact that the other team members don't know the new team member yet. This can even be more generalised. When working with Japanese, one should be careful about just stating the own opinion bluntly. It might appear overconfident or depending on the situation even disrespectful to do so.

To be polite was another prominent answer, when asked about how to gain trust. This might appear obvious at first glance; however the definition of politeness in Japan differs quite a lot from the German one. For example: Japanese will never interrupt a person, who is speaking, even if they have something urgent to say. Since Japanese value their culture quite a lot it is also considered very polite and shows care if one addresses other team members with the correct title –san. This title is similar to the English Mr. or Ms., however it is used after the last name, for example Smith-san. One important first step for trust building with Japanese people is to remember their names and address them with the correct title of –san. This is already highly valued and shows appreciation of the Japanese culture. Moreover it is vital to not openly criticize someone in front of the whole team for a mistake they made. It is much more valued to have a one on one conversation with the person and explain the mistake as well as already give possible solutions to resolve it.

From a cultural point of view the difficulty to gain trust from Japanese people can mainly be addressed to the very high level of uncertainty avoidance in Japanese culture. Most Japanese trust in people they know, where there is a very low risk of them behaving in an unpredictable way. In contrast it is very difficult for them to trust someone they don't know and have never seen, since they do not have any idea how this person will behave in any way. In order to counteract this difficulty to gain the

trust of Japanese people as a new German team member of a virtual team, the best strategy is to make oneself as predictable as possible. Obviously, if one is in a team that is entirely virtual, a dinner or generally meeting face to face is impossible, however there are still quite a few measures that can be undertaken. By remembering names and addressing people with the title –san, not only respect for the Japanese culture is shown, but by being not as “foreign” to the Japanese team members you appear more predictable. Higher predictability can be also achieved by doing and presenting work in a clear and consistent structure, which is also highly valued by most Japanese people.

It can be seen that gaining trust appears to be one of the most important challenges that has to be overcome, however, at the same time it is probably one of the most difficult ones when working with Japanese. This is mainly due to the high uncertainty avoidance that is typical in Japanese culture, while at the same time usually not being able to meet face to face or have more private conversations in the virtual team setting.

7.1.2 Communication

As already identified in the section about trust, trust is an important fundament for effective communication; as a result the first challenge to overcome in order to ensure effective communication is to establish as much trust as possible. According to Chhay & Kleiner, 2013, pp.29-30) the other two major challenges to communication in virtual teams are cultural diversity and nonverbal communication. The 3 major categories of cultural diversity, when it comes to communication are functional differences of the members, organizational differences and nationalities of members (Daim et Al., 2012, p.203). In order to overcome the lack of nonverbal communication, “virtual team members must communicate explicitly, clearly, concisely and quickly” (Chhay & Kleiner, 2013, p.30).

Most of the interviewed employees were part in a virtual project team including Germans. Being a project team usually meant that team members came from different departments and had all sorts of different functional backgrounds. However,

neither during the interviews nor from the observations of the researcher, was there an issue, which originated in functional differences that could be identified.

There were however quite a few functional differences that could be identified and were also brought up during the interviews. Mercedes-Benz Japan as a subsidiary of Daimler AG is much smaller than the headquarters in Germany. Therefore most employees have more and often different responsibilities, which is usually not the case in Germany. In the virtual teams this often led to confusion on the German side, since they were used to one person having one dedicated responsibility, which often was not the case in Japan. The fact that often Japanese people, for politeness reasons tend to take questions from the Germans with them that are not related to their responsibility in order to ask the responsible person themselves instead of directing the person asking to the responsible person does not necessarily help with resolving the confusion.

The most issues can, however, be traced back to the different nationalities and cultural backgrounds of the members. The first and most obvious communication issue that is true for both Germans and Japanese members is the fact that everyone has to communicate in a third language: English. This not only hinders communication, because nobody is communicating in their mother tongue, but also because the level and proficiency in English varies a great amount between the different team members. This issue becomes even worse when you add the fear of Japanese people to lose face in front of everyone. Even if a Japanese member might have something important to say, unless they are very confident on how to express it correctly in English they might not even say it at all out of fear to embarrass themselves in front of the team. Often times even though the English level of interviewees was fairly high, they were very self-critical about their English level and stated, that they needed to improve it. The general topic of language issues during virtual team meetings with Germans was mentioned by interview participants quite frequently.

Another issue that can be related to the different nationalities and cultures is the stark contrast in communication styles between Germans and Japanese. Germans usually have a very direct communication style. This includes directly stating the own opinion, directly address and criticize mistakes and if questions appear they will usually be asked right away. Moreover, Germans will also expect others to

communicate similarly, so if someone does not share their opinion and not criticize anything, they will assume everything is fine. Japanese on the other hand have a very indirect communication style. They will usually have an opinion aligned with the other Japanese colleagues beforehand and not state any personal opinion during a meeting. If asked for an opinion they will usually let the manager state the opinion first and then follow, or in case their opinion is different discuss with the manager after the meeting and, as mentioned earlier, they will not cut in during a conversation, because they do not want to be rude.

The lack of nonverbal communication is on the one hand a large issue, when it comes to the transfer of information through communication, since a large part of information is transferred nonverbally, on the other hand it further affects the gaining of trust negatively, since it is more difficult to assess the behaviour of someone else solely based on their voice or their email writing. One solution to this would be video conferencing, where participants would be able to see other members. This technology, however, is expensive and cannot be utilized everywhere. Another solution to this issue is detailed documentation and information sharing as well as communicating as clearly as possible.

With Japanese “putting harmony of [the] group above the expression of individual opinions” (Hofstede Insights, 2001) and always trying to be aware of how their actions affect others communication is a great challenge between Germans and Japanese. Not only because the communication styles are basically completely opposite of each other, but also because a more direct approach to communication is needed in a virtual team in order to compensate for the lack of non-verbal communication. One way for Germans to facilitate an easier communication with Japanese members would be to include a few opportunities in the meetings which are dedicated for people to ask questions and also specifically ask if anyone has a question. This allows Japanese participants to ask questions without having to interrupt. Also if there is criticism for someone it will be better to address the issue via an email or in a private conversation instead of in front of the whole team.

7.1.3 Leadership

The two primary function of a virtual team leader are performance management and team development (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002, cited in Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008, p.91), however, the latter is not as important, since virtual team members are usually chosen for their “expertise and competence” (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002, p.26). Another function that Neeley (2016, p.12) identified is to manage the social distance between team members and he also sees the role of the team leader as more of a cyclical one rather than a linear one.

Performance management in a virtual team is about being clear about which objectives the team has and which responsibilities the individual team members have. This function can be heavily supported by technology and information sharing. Bridging the social distance is the greatest hurdle to overcome when working as a virtual team leader. When asked about leadership and what they would do differently than the leaders of virtual teams they know, many interview participants answered they would focus on involving everyone. They would rather be sort of a moderator or facilitator, since this is what a virtual team needs. This is a very important step in building a team out of a group of people. It is also a very important driver of creating trust. Since if everyone is involved and dedicated to the team, it creates a group atmosphere, which is very important for the building of trust. Another important role of the leader that was mentioned a few times is to create a positive atmosphere and an atmosphere that facilitates trust building. This should include supporting members if they have difficulties, but also encouraging members to support each other mutually.

Describing leadership in a virtual team as “cyclical instead of linear” (Neeley, 2016, p.12) refers to often inconsistent nature of virtual teams. Often they only have direct conversations very rarely and then between two Telcos there might be new team members who joined due to their expertise or generally new issues might have come up. This sets the team back in terms of familiarity and trust and forces the leader to some extent to start over. This is a significant difference to leadership in regular co-located teams, which is usually a lot more linear, due to team members working with each other on a more daily basis.

The different approach to hierarchy in Germany and Japan is not as big of an issue as it might seem at first glance. While German culture tends to have very flat hierarchies and management is criticized openly, if necessary, Japan is quite hierarchical and criticism towards management is, if at all, stated very indirectly and in private. The voice of the manager also has a lot more weight to it compared to the voice of a regular employee. The interview candidates only agreeing to an interview after the manager told them to support the researcher is a very good example for this. However, the fact that they, even though they first did not answer, were very keen on sharing their experience can mainly be addressed to the more collectivistic culture and the concept of thinking about how your actions affect others than the different view towards managers. A combination of collectivism and hierarchical thinking, or rather the need for all decisions to be confirmed by higher management, is also the reason why Japanese usually before important decisions align everyone before the actual meeting and join the meeting with one collective decision.

7.1.4 Technology/Information Sharing

Technology utilization and information sharing are a challenge in virtual teams that can have a positive impact on every other challenge that has been identified so far, if done correctly. "Information and communication technologies mitigated the negative impact of cultural diversity on team effectiveness while supporting the positive impact" (Shachaf, 2008, p.139). Media richness in virtual teams "has been found to impact team effectiveness, efficiency, level of communication, relationships among team members and team commitment" (Workman, Kahnweiler & Bommer, 2003, cited in Pinjani & Palvia, 2013, p.145).

When asked about their preferred communication method, most interview participants stated, that the chosen communication method depends strongly on the situation. The main benefit of a Telco or Video conference is that it is closer to a real face to face conversation than email. It also allows for several people to discuss on a topic synchronously. It, however, retains most of the negative impact of cultural differences, due to it being as similar to a normal conversation as it is. Presentation material and Screen sharing can eliminate some misunderstandings during a Telco;

however it cannot fully bridge the difference between different communication styles. Email as a mean of communication on the other hand, due to its rather neutral and factual nature can do this in a more effective way. Furthermore email also allows for asynchronous communication, meaning not everyone has to communicate at the same time. This is especially important, since team members work from different time zones and often it is quite difficult to get every team member together at the same time. However, in order to foster the development of trust communication, which is solely based on email, is insufficient. The findings from the interviews support this. Participants stated, that email communication makes documentation easier, but in case of an important decision that has to be made a Telco or Video conference would be the better technology, since it allows direct discussion and with the help of presentation material it can also proactively avoid misunderstandings.

Chat, messenger applications or other communication means that allow for instant messaging and being able to see if the other person is available are also an important tool to gain quick information, if a specific question arises for example. On the other hand those are also an important way to build interpersonal relationships and trust among team members, since those communication tools allow for a more informal communication style.

With regards to the tendency of Japanese to avoid uncertainty as much as possible, technology can assist the team and also the team leader by providing a variety of different channels among which information can be shared. A well thought-out combination of different technologies can foster effective information sharing and therefore proactively avoid many uncertainties from the start. The members and especially the team leader should be fully aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the different communication methods and choose from them accordingly.

7.2 Guideline in the style of PMBOK

Virtual teams are teams “with a common purpose that use technology to cross time zones, distance, and the boundaries of organizations” (Lipnack & Stamps, 1999, p.17). The following guideline will offer recommendations for Germans working in

virtual teams with Japanese. Those guidelines are based on 4 key challenges of virtual teams with regards to the particular cultural characteristics of Japanese and Germans. The 4 key challenges of virtual teams consist of: Trust, Communication, Leadership and Technology/information sharing. Recommendations will be given based on those 4 categories.

Trust

- If possible meet face to face at least once and have an informal dinner
- Address other team members with their last name followed by the title –san.
- Be as polite as possible
- Be clear and consistent in your working style and in the presentation of your results

Communication

- Use clear and simple English
- Encourage and facilitate questions from Japanese team members, since they might be too polite to interrupt
- Do not point out a mistake or criticize a Japanese colleague in front of the whole team (rather have a private conversation with them to point out the mistake)
- For important decisions address the manager first, since the Japanese decision will probably have taken place before the meeting and the manager will be in a position to give this decision

Leadership

- Be a moderator and a facilitator rather than a dictating leader
- Create a positive atmosphere and an atmosphere of trust
- Support all members and encourage members to support each other mutually
- Be aware that leading a virtual team is more cyclical than linear and the leader might need to pick up at an earlier point than the team has stopped the last time due to team changes or responsibility shifts or other changes that might have taken place

Technology

- Be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the different communication technologies, since technology can have positive impacts on every other challenge, if managed correctly
- Use at least one text based technology in order to avoid misunderstandings based on language and to enable colleagues to document topics that have been discussed more easily.

8. Limitations and Recommendations for further Research

The primary research has been conducted exclusively at Mercedes-Benz Japan. Being a subsidiary of a German company, Japanese employees that work for this company, probably have more background knowledge of German culture and of working together with Germans than Japanese who work in a mainly Japanese company. In order to address this limitation further research could be conducted on a larger scale with different companies. An approach with different organisations, however, would add an additional layer of organisational culture to the comparison, which might influence the result further.

There is still a lack of a general guideline for virtual teams in the PMBOK (PMI, 2017). As a first step, before creating a database of the intercultural considerations for any culture working together with any other culture, there should be a general guideline for virtual teams in the PMBOK.

Another limitation of this research is the fact that it is only examining how Germans can improve their project work with Japanese in virtual teams. Further research should be conducted on the collaboration of other cultures in virtual teams with the aim of creating a database in order for everyone to be able to identify some intercultural considerations for every culture they might possibly work with in virtual teams similar to the Hofstede Insights (2001) database, but for virtual teams. This could ultimately enhance the collaboration of virtual teams as a whole.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- How often do you participate in Virtual Teams with Germans and for what reasons?
- Before a Telco or Video conference with German colleagues how do you prepare yourself and colleagues for it?
- During a Telco what do you observe Germans do not understand?
- What do you think Japanese do not understand about Germans?
- After a Telco with German colleagues, which issues are usually discussed by your Japanese colleagues first?

- If you were the team leader of a Global Virtual Team with Germans and Japanese how would you run meetings? What would you do differently?
- What should German colleagues know about company processes and procedures in Japan?
- Which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a global virtual team setting and why?
- How does a new German virtual team member earn the trust and respect of the Japanese colleagues?

- You know I come from Germany, what am I blind to in Japan?
- What else should I ask you and your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team?
- Is there anything else that you would like to mention regarding this topic or anything else that you noticed when working with Germans?

Thank you very much for your time and your great support for this topic

Appendix B: Interview Transcriptions

Interview 1

Interviewer: Again, thank you very much. My Bachelor-Thesis will be about the communication and virtual teamwork between Japanese and German people. And I'm doing those interviews to get first-hand experience from people who work in this setting and once I finish my research and my thesis I will also provide all the findings and everything to MJB so maybe it helps and everyone can profit from it. So first of all how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and usually for what reasons?

Participant: Usually monthly with DAG (Daimler AG) side with several sections, for example I am in charge of Aftersales revenue controlling and usually contact the overseas team in DAG and also the Logistics team. And there is a monthly Telco with overseas team and with the Logistics team maybe around twice a year.

Interviewer: Usually before a Telco or a video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself and also maybe colleagues for the Telco?

Participant: Ah yes. For example the overseas team they are responsible for the profit and that is why I usually prepare the year to date and month to date profit situation before the meeting and also the GSP team they are responsible for the inventory, so I also check how to move the inventory figure on a monthly basis. And maybe behind that the inventory movement is directly connected to the sales and that's why I also check the sales situation. And also the German team, they prepare a beautiful chart every time.

Interviewer: During such a Telco, what do you sometimes observe that maybe the Germans do not really understand?

Participant: (Thinks a little bit) this is maybe my problem; my English skill is not really advanced level I think. That's why I sometimes have to explain not only one time, but two or three times to make them understand.

Interviewer: So usually language problems?

Participant: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Is there also maybe something you or your Japanese colleagues don't really understand about the Germans?

Participant: Depends on (thinking) German people... Depends on which part. Sometimes German people have a dialect. Sometimes a very strong dialect, then I cannot understand their English.

Interviewer: After you finished the Telco with the German colleagues, what are some things or some issues that are usually discussed by you and your Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: Yes, yes. First if in the meeting there has an issue occurred, first we communicate with Japanese colleagues and then we find an answer and then I send them (Germans) and email.

Interviewer: So after the Telco you usually align with all your Japanese colleagues and then you send an email to the Germans afterwards?

Participant: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: So, if you were the team leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese, how would you run the meetings? Or maybe what would you do differently or how would you lead the team?

Participant: Hmm, difficult question. I feel every time I communicate with headquarter side they don't know our market situation even though we explain several times. But maybe they cannot understand. The situation is, they have a lot of people, enough I think, but Japanese side we have very limited number of people, that's why we don't have time. They request from us very high tasks, since we are everything (responsible for everything). And also sometimes they very very interrupt their organisation. In their organisation, they cannot communicate with each other, they concentrate on their responsibilities. They don't know.

Interviewer: You mean the communication between the departments is very limited?

Participant: Yes, yes, yes. But we communicate with a lot of people at MJB, this is totally different. That's a cultural difference.

Interviewer: So if you were the leader you would try to encourage the people more to work between the departments and share the knowledge more.

Participant: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: What are some company processes or procedures in Japan that maybe some German colleagues should know about?

Participant: Hmm, processes?

Interviewer: Just daily business how things are done here, that might be different than in Germany, what the German people maybe don't know.

Participant: Maybe, German people don't know each other, but we have to proceed everything so quickly because we are very close to the customer and we have to decide everything in a very very short time. DAG does not know these kind of things and they want to spend a lot of time on decision making, but we have to decide within one hour or two hours.

Interviewer: So they don't know about your timelines that much?

Participant: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: What are some of the communication methods that you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Hmm. (thinking)

Interviewer: So communication methods meaning like email or Telco or video conference or short message.

Participant: Short message is not very classic. Telephone conference is very convenient. With showing the presentation material and explain to each other this is very good communication.

Interviewer: So if a new German team member enters the virtual team you are part of how can this new team member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues quickly?

Participant: (Laughs) Hmm, basically Japanese colleagues are very kind for each other even though the German or Indian we don't know them yet, but we don't care about that.

Interviewer: For example if a new team member comes what should this team member do that you immediately say wow he/she is a nice person? It is very nice that he/she is in the team now.

Participant: Maybe they should learn the Japanese culture, we have a lot of politeness levels in the language, but do you know English does not have that many polite words?

Interviewer: No not to the extent of Japanese I think.

Participant: They could learn this politeness levels or we have a lot of nice greetings like Ohaigozaimasu and Otsukaresama desu.

Interviewer: So basically respect the culture and be polite and understanding?

Participant: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: OK, you know I am from Germany, what do you think I am maybe blind to in Japan? Or what do I not know about Japanese culture or other persons that might come to Japan that they don't realize about Japan or Japanese culture?

Participant: Recently some German young people worked at MJB, they said I learned the Japanese from Manga. This is kind of very common culture. I don't like Manga but maybe young people. (Thinking)

Interviewer: I think you also kind of mentioned the politeness that I should be very polite and respectful and these kind of things. Do you think there is anything else that I should maybe ask you or other colleagues I do interviews with, that might be relevant for this topic? Is there maybe any question that you expected me to ask you that I didn't ask you?

Participant: You already communicated to how many persons? (Referring to the interviews)

Interviewer: 6 by now.

Participant: How many people do you interview in total?

Interviewer: I try to interview as many as possible.

Participant: Ah so maybe I can ask my colleague and introduce you.

Interviewer: That would be nice. Is there anything else that you would like to mention about this topic that you found very interesting?

Participant: I always think about presentation material. How do German people learn? They usually give us very beautiful presentation material. Maybe they learn in college or I don't know. How to learn this?

Interviewer: We learn it pretty early in school usually. And in school we have to do presentations usually every year like several presentations.

Participant: And the explanations are usually very structured.

Interviewer: I think it is just a lot of practice. They make us do it very early in school.

Participant: I have to learn how to make this kind of beautiful presentation and also the explanation.

Interviewer: I think it is nice that we have to learn it so early because it is very useful. Alright then thank you very much for your time and your support.

Interview 2

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing your experience and I am trying to discover how the communication between Germans and Japanese in virtual teams is working. I want to write my thesis about it. Once I finished my thesis I will also provide it for MBJ, so maybe it helps. First of all, how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and for what reason usually?

Participant: We basically communicate with German people with emails or there is a system called HP ALM where I ask some questions to DAG and they give answers to me via the system.

Interviewer: So basically the reasons are reporting to HQ and aligning with them?

Participant: And it is maybe 3 times a month or maybe 5 times.

Interviewer: Do you also have Telco's with Germans or is it usually only email?

Participant: Just once I had.

Interviewer: How did you prepare for the Telco beforehand?

Participant: I was just sitting there, my colleague prepared everything for the meeting.

Interviewer: During a Telco what do you sometimes observe that Germans do not really understand?

Participant: During the Telco?

Interviewer: Yes, or also during your emails maybe.

Participant: Well, if I ask some questions they always give very straight answers, you know very directly.

Interviewer: What do you think that maybe Japanese people do not understand about Germans or what might be confusing for you as Japanese when you interact with Germans?

Participant: I don't know, I have not faced that kind of situation, like being awkward, before. I guess it's like I said they give very straight answers, they say things directly, but on the other hand if there is people that say like if it's possible... you know, there is a little difference in the way of communication.

Interviewer: After you had a Telco or email contact with German colleagues what are some issues that are usually discussed with your Japanese colleagues?

Participant: I haven't discussed the issues.

Interviewer: Maybe other things you have discussed.

Participant: When I ask a question, for example, I would like to know about the function of this vehicle, they answer the question like the function is this. Just one sentence. But usually I have more things to ask not just one sentence but I would like to know lots of things, but they always give answer to that exact question. So I have to ask a question again and again. That is kind of a problem maybe.

Interviewer: What do you think is a good leadership style in a virtual team or how do you think a good leader in this setting should behave?

Participant: When we work with people from different departments?

Interviewer: Yes for example if you are the leader of a project with Germans and Japanese and regularly have contact via Telco's or things like this, how would you run the meetings?

Participant: Maybe it is important to understand the cultural background of German people and also Japanese people, like German people are rational or something, the more important thing is, I think, that maybe we have to treat them as just a human you know, even if we have a different cultural background we are just in the same team, in the same company and we are human beings after all. Even if there is a difference maybe, but we should not have prejudice about their culture or their behaviour.

Interviewer: What do you think that German colleagues should know about company processes and procedures in Japan?

Participant: Hmm (laughs), I don't know. For example? Do you know any kind of example?

Interviewer: I don't know, more in general, from a business perspective what might be different in Japan, that maybe Germans do not know about? Or how you handle things like meetings or everything kind of how you run the business here.

Participant: Ah ok. I haven't encountered this situation, but maybe there is a meeting that decides something important. Before the meeting Japanese people often meet and have dinner or something and they decide about the matter first and then they just have the meeting, but it is just the meeting not for deciding the matter because they have already decided before the meeting. But that kind of things is maybe not for German people, it is not Germany style I don't know. That is a very specific way to decide something.

Interviewer: Which communication methods do you or your Japanese colleagues usually prefer, in their virtual team and why?

Participant: Which?

Interviewer: Communication methods. Like do you prefer email or Telco or video conference or other things like short messages?

Participant: It depends on what we decide. If it is just about one question we can use emails, but if it is more complicated or if we have to ask some details we have to maybe do a phone call.

Interviewer: How do you think if a new German team member enters a virtual team with Japanese and Germans, how can this new team member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Is that person supposed to work in Japan or in Germany?

Interviewer: In Germany. It's just a virtual team, so he will participate in Telco's and have regular email contact with Japanese and Germans, but he will not really be working in Japan.

Participant: Maybe to understand each of the members. Of course that person has to remember each person's name, understand what they do and what has been discussed.

Interviewer: Yeah you know I am from Germany, what do you think I am blind to in Japan or what do you think I don't really see about Japanese culture?

Participant: You?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: (Laughs) That is actually the first time I really speak to you so I don't know how much you know about Japan.

Interviewer: But also in general maybe, if a person comes to Japan for the first time from Germany for example, what might be surprising to them or what do they probably not know about Japanese culture?

Participant: I don't know what they don't know about Japanese culture, but I think it's not only German people, but also foreigners tend to exaggerate Japanese characteristics like, you know, they bow often or they are too polite or they always eat Sushi or something. They tend to exaggerate Japanese characteristics, but in the end it is not like that.

Interviewer: So you would think that it would be the best to just be as open-minded as possible?

Participant: Don't see people as like oh he is Japanese oh he is German but maybe they have to respect people as a person.

Interviewer: What else do you think I should ask you and maybe also your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team? Is there anything, any question that you think I should ask?

Participant: I think you should ask some questions based on the actual matters, like from your experience. You are also working with Japanese people, so maybe you have some experience, for example something did not work well or something you realized, you know, the difference between Japanese people and German people. So based on your experience maybe you can ask some questions.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you think should or could be mentioned regarding this topic, the virtual teams between Germans and Japanese, which has not been mentioned yet?

Participant: Actually I have never thought of you as a German person, or I have never thought of people from DAG as German people I just treat them as people. I would like to know the difference between German people and Japanese people so I will read your thesis.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time.

Interview 3

Interviewer: First of all, how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and usually for what reasons?

Participant: In terms of my main job, I communicate with them maybe twice a month and I also do audit and sometimes it happens sometimes it doesn't for example this year we had it and it takes about 1 or 2 weeks to do that audit and we have about 2 hour Telco every day for this 1 week or 2 weeks.

Interviewer: And, so usually it is for reporting back to HQ and this kind of stuff?

Participant: Reporting back or budget discussion, yes.

Interviewer: Ok. Before you have a Telco or video conference with German colleagues, how do you usually prepare yourself and your colleagues for the Telco?

Participant: They usually send me the agenda or some sort of document, so I look through this and make some notes on the points I want to discuss. Is that enough preparation? (laughs)

Interviewer: And then during the Telco do you sometimes observe something that Germans do not understand?

Participant: Yes, there are sometimes technical issues with the phone and they can't hear us or sometimes it's the Japanese culture or Japanese company politics, that they can't understand.

Interviewer: For example?

Participant: For example, if in terms of budget maybe like they would say we will cut the budget because something, but that wouldn't fly in MBJ or management would not understand that reason, so we kind of have to say that's not enough can you explain more? And for them it's enough, so it's difficult for them to describe. What else? Yes, or sometimes, but this is not a German Japanese thing, but sometimes there is a holiday for Japan and we need more time or they need more time and sometimes we can't understand each other why they would take so much time off during summer. And MBJ is smaller, so a lot of us are looking at the sales target every month and for example the audit team in Germany, they maybe forget that it is the end of the month or something and they don't really consider the fact that it is on a tight schedule.

Interviewer: Alright, and maybe the other way round, do you think that there are some things that the Japanese do not really understand about the Germans? Or maybe you personally?

Participant: Hmm, I usually think that they... I sometimes think that they are not speaking in the eyes of us. Wait what they don't understand about me? What I don't understand about them?

Interviewer: Yes, what Japanese people sometimes do not understand about the Germans?

Participant: Maybe how strict they are, with timeline or wording or attitude maybe?

Interviewer: Ok, and after a Telco with German colleagues, I often see that the Japanese colleagues discuss a lot afterwards in the Telcos I participate in, or in general what is usually discussed by your Japanese colleagues and you first or maybe some issues or general things.

Participant: What do I do after the Telco?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: I usually take notes on what they said and I write down open topics and then I just report it back to my manager. So that if... usually it's me or him in the Telco, so we both know what is open for the next one and what is not, and some of them we can close it by emailing them instead of waiting for the next telco.

Interviewer: Ok, so if you were the leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese how would you run the meetings? Or is there something you would do

differently than the leader of the team you are participating in? Or generally what do you think should a good leader in this setting do?

Participant: Hmm, maybe it is not an option but it's good to meet at least once, so we know what kind of person the other person is, some people I have never met and I assume they are so scary, but if I meet in person maybe they are not. So it would be nice if there is an opportunity to meet and then we go into the Telco every day. If we never meet again it is ok but at least seeing face to face once is a good thing. Also it is difficult just with the voice so I would definitely share the screen and if the room allows it maybe the video would be good, so we know who is who and who is speaking and sometimes when it is phone we don't know who said it and after, they have 8 people and we have 8 people and I would say 'you said' but I don't know who said it, so it would be good to know who is speaking, also sharing the notes before and after would be good, it is time consuming so maybe one of the team, Germany or Japan, can take it and share it, if we both take notes and then share it maybe we would have different notes so maybe one team take it and then share it and maybe next time the other one would take it and share it.

Interviewer: And then, you already mentioned the different company processes and procedures in Japan, what are some of those processes or procedures in Japan that the German colleagues should know about?

Participant: Politics!? It is difficult to understand.

Interviewer: You mean like the personal politics in the company?

Participant: Yes, if it is regarding this topic then these people would be involved in MBJ, so it needs to be structured in this way to present to them, I am in Controlling so maybe it is not what to do tomorrow or what to do about this project, but it is about what should we do in 3 years, what should we do in 10 years. What about the money, what about constructing something or in a bigger scale, so I deal with most of the management, in that sense I wish they knew what kind of people they are so they would know that I would need more information or what kind of information we would be looking for, but it is ok, I ask questions and then they give it to me. What else? Maybe business itself, we do import cars and we sell cars, maybe to dealers but maybe not, maybe they sell it on their own, so it would be nice if they knew more about the business model in Japan so they would know what they are talking about.

Interviewer: Ok, in a virtual team setting, which communication methods do Japanese colleagues or you personally prefer, and why?

Participant: Method? Like phone or email?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: I prefer Skype, the messaging. I want to call them but I want to save evidence, but email is too long they never respond, setting up telco (argh) scheduling

with everyone is so difficult, so I usually do Skype chat. They respond quickly, I know if they are there or not and I can have the evidence of what they said.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Ok, and if a new German team member would enter your virtual team, how could this new member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues quickly?

Participant: Are you talking about yourself? (Laughs)

Interviewer: No (Laughs)

Participant: Wait so German member in Japanese team in Japan?

Interviewer: No, in the virtual team, so if your team that you are working regularly with, if they had a new German member how could this new member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Hmmm, it is not really language for me, maybe just be nice and logical thinking is not usually and issue with Germans, yeah some certain things, maybe nationality doesn't matter, structured conversation would be good and maybe using easier words for the Japanese colleagues, the level of English is different with everyone so it would be nice if they could phrase things with easy words and repeat what they say.

Interviewer: Ok, you know I am from Germany, what do you think I am blind to in Japan? Maybe culture-wise or also general?

Participant: I would think that Germans are very direct, and I sometimes like it I sometimes don't. They're direct, which is good, I know what they are saying I know what they want, but maybe in Japanese culture it is too harsh, too strict and in a business setting in the Japanese culture maybe some negotiation with lighter words and lighter phrasing is important for them to understand so maybe that is the number one thing.

Interviewer: Ok, and is there anything else that you think I should ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in virtual teams, like maybe any question that you expected from me but I did not ask?

Participant: In this interview?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: That was a very thorough interview I would say. I would be curious to know the other way around. What would Japanese people have to be careful of when being in a virtual team with German colleagues?

Interviewer: So basically you interviewing me? (Laughs)

Participant: Yes (laughs)

Interviewer: Is there generally anything else that you think should be mentioned regarding this topic?

Participant: It would be interesting to know if it is like cultural difference or personal preference? And I am Japanese but not “really”.

Interviewer: Why do you say not really?

Participant: I studied in America for 10 years so maybe between German and Japanese and I understand both sides, but I have only worked in Japan so I only know how business is in Japan. Yeah so I would be curious to see your result if it is culture or preference or if it is just a Daimler thing.

Interviewer: Yeah I will provide my finished thesis to MBJ.

Interview 4

Interviewer: So thank you very much for sharing your experience on working with Germans in a virtual team. With this interview I try to discover how to improve the communication and the virtual teamwork between people in Germany and people in Japan and once I finished my research I will also provide my thesis to MBJ so maybe it can help a little bit. So let's start. How often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and usually for what reasons?

Participant: Mainly I have a Telco with German HQ people around once per week around 1h. The content is, I am in charge of a project provided from Germany, so we are always discussing how to implement and after implement some trouble happens and then we are discussing.

Interviewer: So you are basically getting the expertise from Germany a little bit and also align the project with them?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, so before you have a telco or video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself or also the Japanese colleagues that also take part in the telco, like what is your preparation?

Participant: Usually, I send an invitation to them, a telco invitation, and in this invitation I usually put the agenda for this one week, our discussion and this agenda is usually prepared subject by subject. I get many ideas, questions, complaints from our dealership or our colleagues so I gather such voices and sort it and then I make the agenda.

Interviewer: Ok, and during the telco then with the Germans what do you sometimes observe that the German people don't really understand?

Participant: Difficult question. When we use the system, the number of users or how often they use, how many people can use it, sometimes German people told us you need one exclusive guy to handle this subject, but our dealership is small compared to Germany so we don't have so much people, then we have a conflict.

Interviewer: So they don't really know the circumstances here in Japan that well?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: And if you turn this question around, what do you sometimes think the Japanese people do not understand about the Germans?

Participant: In MBJ, not dealership, sometimes we have to follow the HQ's decision, even though such a decision is not suitable for Japan or sometimes doesn't work so much for us, but sometimes we have to follow. People in MBJ we have let's say to categories, one follows the HQ's decision, and the others don't like to follow and then conflict arises.

Interviewer: Ok, and then after the telco is over with the German colleagues, what are usually some issues or some topics that are immediately discussed with your Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Sometimes we ask Germany to change the system, but they cannot accept, then in MBJ we have to discuss how to utilize the German system.

Interviewer: So find another solution together?

Participant: Yes. System cannot change, but some alternative or how to use it we will think about.

Interviewer: Ok, so if you personally were the team leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese people how would you run the meetings or what would you maybe do differently than the leader of the team you are currently in?

Participant: You mean with German people and Japanese people the difference?

Interviewer: No, so if you are the leader of the team, so you are the boss, what would you do? Like how would you run the meetings or what is your idea of the leadership in this setting?

Participant: You are asking the leadership?

Interviewer: Yes so what do you think is very important for a leader? What should he do to be a good leader in a virtual team setting?

Participant: For me it's, make it clear why we have a meeting and don't stick to the own personal opinion, try to find the best way of course but also an alternative solution.

Interviewer: Ok, so what should the German colleagues know about company processes and procedures in Japan?

Participant: Again?

Interviewer: German colleagues about some company processes or procedures in Japan? Like how things are done around here, like how do you proceed with things?

Participant: Proceed with Germany?

Interviewer: No, proceed with anything here in Japan, maybe there are some processes that are very different to Germany, so what should the German people know about how business is done in Japan?

Participant: Ah I see. In the meeting Japanese people don't speak so much or don't show own opinion if the boss is sitting next to them, so usually boss shows an opinion so we follow. And before we come to the meeting we usually already negotiated, that means in the meeting this is not a discussion place decision place. That is a very different point I think.

Interviewer: So you think German people often discuss a lot in the meetings and talk to everyone and Japanese people usually already prepare their opinion before the meeting and align everyone and then all Japanese have one opinion about it kind of?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok.

Participant: Recently this also changed.

Interviewer: Alright, which communication methods do you prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Actually I don't like email. I prefer face to face meeting, because email is easy to communicate but also easy to show your personal opinion not the groups decision.

Interviewer: Ah I see what you mean, so basically in a telco it is easier to include everyone and talk to everyone and in an email it is just you sending something to someone else, so it is very much your own views.

Participant: No, sometimes I like to say that email only shows your opinion not your group or your company's opinion. Sometimes they only send personal opinion and then everybody sends their personal opinion. No compromise, no discussion, that I don't like.

Interviewer: I understand what you mean. If there would be a new German team member in your virtual team, how could this new team member earn the trust and the respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: How to get the trust from Japanese colleagues?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: Of course if you are a new member you have an own opinion, but sometimes we don't know your background or your knowledge for this group, if you have enough knowledge, then we will hear your voice, but for a newcomer you have to hear first how everybody thinks about this subject and then after that you can give the opinion.

Interviewer: Ok, so you know I am German what do you think I am blind to in Japan? What do I maybe not see about the Japanese culture or the Japanese in general?

Participant: Some point you miss from your point?

Interviewer: Yes, what do you think I don't see about the Japanese culture? Not necessarily me, but also someone who comes from Germany to Japan what do they maybe not see about the culture and how it works and everything?

Participant: First, Japanese persons do not show the personal feeling to others too much. If I think you are a good guy and would be a good friend we don't shake hand and hug or such thing we usually don't do that. In that sense I think we don't show my personal feeling to others too much. That's a Japanese cultural behaviour so you should not worry about that. I think in a one to one meeting, then we can express my opinion or feeling, but in some group and especially in the company's group then people hesitate to show feelings. Is that an answer to your question?

Interviewer: Yes, yes. Thank you. Is there maybe something that I should ask you or other colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team? Is there maybe any question that you expected me to ask you that I didn't ask you? Or any question you think I should ask people?

Participant: Please again.

Interviewer: So what else should I ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team?

Participant: Hmm.

Interviewer: Maybe you expected me to ask you something during this interview that I didn't ask you?

Participant: Maybe I have to ask you during your stay in our section how do you feel about the Japanese persons and work behaviour.

Interviewer: So that is something that you would like to ask me?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: I think what I really liked is that everyone was very supportive, so everyone was eager to help if there was any trouble and everyone was also very nice and included me and other trainees in the team.

Participant: Do you feel difference from German to Japan?

Interviewer: The things you already mentioned are pretty obvious for me also, from Germany to Japan, because in Germany it is pretty common to just state your opinion and discuss about it and usually you don't really align with everyone first, just like 'that is what I think' so I think that is a very strong difference. But there are also some things that are similar, for example I think both Germans and Japanese tend to be a little more reserved and polite as well, maybe the Japanese a little more than the Germans but I think that is similar. Is there maybe anything else you would like to mention about working in virtual teams with Germans? Or anything that you noticed when working with Germans that was not mentioned yet?

Participant: I learned from the work with the HQ guys, first I have to mention what I want to do. Then discuss with Germans. The reason is, in Japan, before I mention something I also think about my Japanese other member situation. If I say this comment, then this is not good for the colleague, then I sometimes hesitate. You understand?

Interviewer: I think so. So basically you mean that if you want to do something in Japan you first consider what everyone else is thinking about it and how it affects the other people and then you might not propose to do it because you think it might maybe negatively affect someone else.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: And from the German colleagues you have more the perspective that you just say what you want to do and then people, if they have a problem with it they just discuss and say 'no that is not good for me' and then you just talk.

Participant: The German guys, they can express their opinion more than Japanese. First I say the best way or the ideal way, then some objection come up from German colleague and then we negotiate and find a solution. But in Japan if we do so then some people hesitate to join the meeting and sometimes Japanese behaviour we don't discuss so much.

Interviewer: So if you would do it here then maybe someone would not have the chance to say their opinion and would just stay silent?

Participant: Yes, that's the Japanese behaviour.

Interviewer: So thank you very much.

Interview 5

Interviewer: So thank you very much again for sharing your experience and my Bachelor Thesis is about the working together of Japanese and Germans in virtual teams and I try to get some first-hand experience from people who actually have experience in this field and once I finished my research and my thesis I will also send it to MBJ, so maybe it helps in some way. Ok so let's start.

Participant: When will you complete your report?

Interviewer: I will go back to Germany in the end of September and then I will start the last semester of my studies and during this semester I will write the thesis and it will probably be finished around January or February next year. So first of all, how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans?

Participant: Virtual teams? It also depends on how you define virtual team, but actually I work with Germans regularly.

Interviewer: Every week or every day?

Participant: Yes, my boss is also German and my counterpart is also German. So there is always some communication with them.

Interviewer: Ah ok, an usually if you have a Telco or a Video conference with German colleagues, how do you usually prepare yourself and also your colleagues before the Telco starts?

Participant: I think the Germans, it's just my feeling, but I think the Germans like to have some logic, very logical thinking. For them the reason for something is often very important. You understand what I mean?

Interviewer: You mean you want to first give them a clear reason why you want to have the telco...

Participant: Something like that yes, why you said this and that and also Germans like their rules you know?

Interviewer: Yes I know.

Participant: And you should also follow some guidelines.

Interviewer: Ok, and what do you do for yourself, like how do you yourself prepare for the telco? Like do you write some things down that you want to ask or generally how is your procedure before a Telco for yourself?

Participant: If I have a Telco, if I have time I like to have some questions, but sometimes also the Germans they prepared everything and sometimes there are questions which would make the person upset, you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes, so you try to prepare some questions, but sometimes you don't really get to ask them, because the people think their presentation is perfect?

Participant: Yes. So sometimes there is kind of an easy question but a good question I ask during the telco, but if it is something very complicated in that case I would ask separately.

Interviewer: Ok, and during a telco, what do you sometimes observe that the Germans do not really understand?

Participant: Hmm, I think from my viewpoint they understand if I explain something logically, but if someone asks some question and the question is not so good, the German can't answer, but they always try to understand the questions so I think it is good.

Interviewer: And if you turn it the other way round, what do you think the Japanese do not understand about the Germans sometimes?

Participant: I think the big difference is, that the Japanese are ... sometimes I see the same behaviour in the UK, so British or English also tends to avoid some threat or opinion or expression, but German likes this one, you know what I mean? And sometimes the Japanese have some bad feeling and I would not state my opinion, but I know this is German behaviour so it's not a problem. I think it's a big difference. So very indirectly we express something.

Interviewer: Ok and after a telco you had with German colleagues what issues or things are usually discussed by the Japanese colleagues first after the telco?

Participant: After the telco? Hmm.

Interviewer: Because often when I participate in Telcos I realize that after the Telco all the Japanese people start discussing things in Japanese and what do you usually discuss?

Participant: (Laughs) I see. It's not only about the German, but sometimes we also share or guess what someone has said. Like maybe he said blablabla. That's what we discuss, so therefore maybe we should do this. So these are usually the things that are discussed after the telco. Of course those things we cannot discuss during the telco.

Interviewer: Yes. So if you were the team leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese how would you run the meetings or what things would you maybe do differently than the team leaders in the teams you are part of?

Participant: Ah, good question. I would say if I am the leader of meetings I would prepare a very clear purpose and some clear discussion point and maybe I would already prepare some result, but maybe if I see the discussion maybe if the result of the discussion is better I would follow the result of the discussion.

Interviewer: Ok interesting. Is there anything that German colleagues should know about company processes and procedures in Japan, that are special here and maybe not in Germany?

Participant: I think it is similar. You like to follow rules and for example if there is a new person or rotation we follow the rules but besides these rules for example I would like to have this person maybe in that case I already contact this person, are you interested in my department or something. I think this also happens in Germany I would say. However we need to follow the rules so I need to open the job and have interviews with several persons but sometimes it is already decided.

Interviewer: So this is something that is special in Japan that maybe the German colleagues should know about it.

Participant: And also Japanese behaviour could be different but mostly the Japanese people wouldn't like real discussions at the meeting especially if top management participates. If top management participates in the meeting we share the information already beforehand

Interviewer: Which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Hmm.

Interviewer: So if you are in a virtual team for example the FIMS, which are the best communication methods and which do you prefer?

Participant: I think for that kind of project a regular call is the best, because we can track the status and also ask questions and if there are no questions we can proceed. And in my opinion I would prefer something like a direct communication, because my job is accounting so sometimes I need documents but sometimes I don't like that, I'd like to avoid the documents sometimes a discussion should take place, and basically I prefer a direct communication. So I call my German colleagues and then if the discussion is finished and the results were shared then I will send an email.

Interviewer: Ok. If there would be a new German team member in the virtual team, how could this new team member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Difficult question. (Thinking)

Interviewer: So for example now we also have a new member in the FIMS project who replaces David, what could she do in order to earn the respect and the trust of Japanese people?

Participant: I would say he or she needs to learn the project already beforehand, maybe from David and they should know about the project very in detail.

Interviewer: So basically the most important thing is to do your job properly and prepare well beforehand?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok. You know I am German, what do you think I am blind to in Japan? What do I not know about Japanese people or about the Japanese culture?

Participant: I think you need to have good friends. Good Japanese friends.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Ok. Is there anything I should ask you or your colleagues about this topic? Is there anything you expected me to ask you that I didn't ask you yet?

Participant: Hmm.

Interviewer: Or maybe anything else. Any other point or topic that you think would be important to add?

Participant: Maybe Germans need to discuss more about emotional things. Maybe at a business meeting you don't discuss about emotions, but for example a discussion only between u, maybe we could talk about more private things. You know what I mean?

Interviewer: You mean that the Germans are very reserved and don't really talk about their private life and their emotions or their private things with other colleagues and only talk about the work?

Participant: Not exactly, but they don't really say how they feel about things.

Interviewer: Ah ok. Then thanks again very much for your time and input.

Interview 6

Interviewer: Thank you very much for sharing your experience. With this interview I try to discover some things on how to improve the communication German people and Japanese people in virtual teams and once I finished my Bachelor thesis I will also send it to MBJ, so maybe it helps. So the first question would be: How often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and for what reasons usually.

Participant: You mean the current situation?

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant: So now I am part of the FIMS project, with German colleagues involved. Of course I have several other project topics, but regarding the involvement of Germans only the FIMS project.

Interviewer: So you have basically one major project together with Germans?

Participant: Now I am communicating with them just at the weekly call, because my responsibility is SWT and this is managed by Singapore.

Interviewer: So you regularly communicate with them and once per week is usually the Telco. Usually before a Telco or video conference with German colleagues, how do you prepare yourself and colleagues?

Participant: Depends on the situation or responsibility for the project.

Interviewer: Yes, but for example for the FIMS project how do you prepare?

Participant: For FIMS I usually mainly prepare myself based on the meeting minutes or the shared project log, such kind of information. I usually check after the call means before the next call. Then in case I need something I try to clarify with responsible colleagues in advance as much as possible. Because the weekly telco is very limited but has so many items, so I always try to clarify my queries with them in advance.

Interviewer: Ok, and during the telcos what do you sometimes observe that Germans do not really understand?

Participant: From my experience I have several cases or many cases (laughs) but one is just about virtual communication, now we communicated with the help of Skype or something and shared screen, but before that we just communicated verbally. So we don't have a common screen shared among everyone than there were difficult situations we had. Not only verbal communication but also after call and before call I tried to communicate with them via email and write the detail or with some attachment like an excel sheet, to make them understand correctly.

Interviewer: Ok, and the other way round what do you sometimes think that Japanese colleagues do not understand about the Germans?

Participant: Not a particular case for the Germans I think.

Interviewer: Alright, and after a Telco with German colleagues what are usually some issues or some things that are discussed by your Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: Ah this is kind of normal. Such after call discussions internally is very important. If I understand correctly but what they addressed, but how about other colleagues who join? A common understanding is very important, and then if we found some differences or we didn't understand something sometimes we raise a hand to German colleagues to confirm that.

Interviewer: So you just try to get everyone on the same page...

Participant: Yeah sometimes if nobody understands and no one does anything then on the next call such small differences become very big differences.

Interviewer: I understand. So what is your idea of leadership in a virtual team and how would you define a good leader in this setting?

Participant: Sorry, what do you mean by that?

Interviewer: What do you think a good leader of a virtual team has to do? Like what characteristics should he have and how should he behave in order to be a good leader of the virtual team?

Participant: I should not expect from the leader, each participant should have a proactive mind, based on the responsibility of each. The leader is just the leader, of course some issues happen so he needs to have a support function and we should escalate to them, but basically each participant should be involved and try to close all the issues.

Interviewer: So you think the leader should be more like a moderator and get everyone involved?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, that's basically also if you would be the leader of a virtual team that's how you would do it? Try to get everyone's opinion and make everyone do their responsibilities.

Participant: Actually, such action should be done by project management.

Interviewer: Ok, what should German colleagues now about company processes and general procedure in Japan?

Participant: They should consider Japan specific topics, I think in most cases it is not easy for them.

Interviewer: Yes, that's why I was asking, do you think there is any company processes...

Participant: The Japanese should explain them so that they understand correctly. It is also our task. Otherwise we shouldn't expect them to know.

Interviewer: Do you maybe know any example that often causes problems for Germans?

Participant: Especially for the legal topic also Japanese culture related topic. It's not easy to make them understand.

Interviewer: Ok, and then which communications methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: With Germans?

Interviewer: Yes so if you have a virtual team with Germans, which communication method do you prefer?

Participant: I think email.

Interviewer: And why?

Participant: In case of important documents we have evidence. Not just verbal. Although it is sometimes more easy to communicate verbally, but there is no history remaining afterwards.

Interviewer: So you think email is better because you have it in a written format and you can also document it better?

Participant: Yes

Interviewer: Ok, and if there would be a new German team member in your virtual team how could this new member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues quickly?

Participant: Is the new member physically here?

Interviewer: No not necessarily, we recently had the change from David to Kamer in the FIMS project, how could she for example earn trust and respect from the Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Having good communication not just focus on the project topic.

Interviewer: So also personal communication with the colleagues?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, you know I am German, what do you think I am blind to in Japan? What do you think I don't really realize about the Japanese culture and about the Japanese?

Participant: As a responsible person, if your responsibility is close to Japanese culture or Japanese persons you should understand, this is also the task.

Interviewer: Yes, but do you maybe have any examples of something people who are from outside don't understand about the Japanese culture at first?

Participant: Good question, if it affects his or her task they should try to explain such Japanese culture and behaviour. This should also be our task I think. Basic understanding of the Japanese culture should be the basis of his or her work in Japan.

Interviewer: Ok, and what else do you think I should ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team? Was there maybe any question that you expected me to ask you.

Participant: I have no particular issues working with Germans.

Interviewer: And is there anything else that you think we didn't talk about yet?

Participant: No not really.

Interviewer: Ok then thank you very much for your time and your support, that was all from my side.

Interview 7

Interviewer: Ok, so thank you very much for sharing your knowledge with me. I want to try to improve communication between people in Germany and Japan that work in virtual teams and once I finished my thesis I will also send the whole thing to Ogata-san so maybe it helps. The first question is basic: How often do you participate in virtual teams and...

Participant: Email or telephone?

Interviewer: Like how many teams are you in virtually with Germans?

Participant: On email base we create an email everyday but on face to face like with a camera maybe it is once a month.

Interviewer: Ok and for what reasons do you usually have the team?

Participant: The reason why...?

Interviewer: Why you are in the virtual team with Germans?

Participant: Ah ok sorry, I am working on the owner's manual and we have to feedback the quality of translations to HQ, so that is why we need to create an email or sometimes about the content we need to create a ticket on the system, so that is why.

Interviewer: Before you have a telco or video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself and participating colleagues for it?

Participant: Ok, so first I send out an email about the agenda, because we need to know each other or what we want to talk about in advance, so we send the agenda.

Interviewer: Alright, if you are in a telco with Germans what do you sometimes observe that Germans do not really understand?

Participant: Sometimes they don't understand about the complaint from customers, because the customer in Germany and the customer in Japan is totally different.

Interviewer: Ok, so then if you explain to them what the customers don't like they don't have any idea why?

Participant: Yes, for example Japanese customer wants to know why my vehicle has a crack or damage.

Interviewer: Ok, what do you as a Japanese or other Japanese colleagues sometimes not really understand about Germans?

Participant: Haha, about holiday, they have very long holiday, but it's a good thing. I am on the Germans side (laughs)

Interviewer: Yeah that is pretty different. And then after you had the telco with German colleagues, which issues do you usually discuss with your Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: About the topics?

Interviewer: Yeah generally, issues that came from the Telco, issues that arose with the work together with the Germans, or...

Participant: I don't get the point, sorry could you please...

Interviewer: Yes, so after you had a telco with the German colleagues you sometimes discuss some issues with your Japanese colleagues and what are usually the first issues that come to your mind?

Participant: The point is about that we explain correctly to them, because misunderstanding is not so good.

Interviewer: So you and your colleagues are usually very concerned about getting the right message across.

Participant: Yes, we say: we were discussing about blahblahblah...

Interviewer: So you are always trying to communicate with your colleagues if everyone got the right and same understanding?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ah ok, what is your idea of leadership in a global virtual team and how would you define a good leader in this setting?

Participant: Diversity is very important, because if I don't accept this I cannot manage someone else.

Interviewer: So accepting all the different cultures?

Participant: Just a moment I am searching the word. For example if you are a manager and I am a sub and I am working everyday but you are concerned about my job because you don't know if I can work.

Interviewer: So you mean that a good leader should also trust in his employees and in their ability?

Participant: Yes, thank you very much (laughs)

Interviewer: And is there anything, like if you would be the leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese is there anything that you would do differently or how would you run the meetings or do you think everything is fine?

Participant: I think it is good, but I think we need to go to Germany more often.

Interviewer: So more face to face time?

Participant: Yes not only email.

Interviewer: What should German colleagues know about company processes and procedures in Japan?

Participant: Hmm, good question. How many customers are complaining about the content of the owner's manual. They should know, but they don't know.

Interviewer: And is there maybe also some kind of processes that you need to go through if you want to do something in Japan?

Participant: No I think it is a very similar process, because the owner's manual includes all markets contents, this means some part of them is not introduced into Japanese market, some functions, so this is standardized for them, but for us it is not perfect.

Interviewer: And so they don't really understand the Japanese processes for the manual and just use their processes?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ah I understand. Which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Almost all Japanese colleagues like to use email, because they want to write what they want to do.

Interviewer: So to avoid misunderstanding or what is the reason?

Participant: Yes, the problem is lack of face to face.

Interviewer: If a new German virtual team member would come to the team, how could he or she earn the trust and the respect of the Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Hmm, maybe to go drinking (laughs). Yes after 6 some communication we should have.

Interviewer: So also more private conversations.

Participant: Yes, people don't like in Germany right? If it is private it is private.

Interviewer: Yes maybe it might be a little more separated yes. But this would be one thing for you that you think would help?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, so you know I am German, what do you think I am blind to in Japan? Like what do I not know in Japan, what is special?

Participant: I think you are smart, because you know the market or the culture, but one thing if I give you some feedback or advice, then maybe you can talk with the colleagues who cannot speak English very well, some people like me can't speak English very well so they don't speak anything.

Interviewer: So you mean they are just too shy to speak because they think their English is too bad?

Participant: I think you are not shy, but other people are shy.

Interviewer: Yes that is what I meant, like you think that a lot of people in Japan might speak English but are not confident in their ability and therefore are shy and don't talk at all.

Participant: Yes, so maybe you can break the wall.

Interviewer: So you mean it is helpful to approach the people more directly because a lot of them are just shy.

Participant: They want to know about you, but they can't.

Interviewer: Ok, what else do you think I should or could ask you and your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team?

Participant: You?

Interviewer: What do you think that I should ask you and other colleagues about working in a virtual team with Germans? Or is there anything else that you think would be interesting or important about this topic that you didn't mention yet?

Participant: You could create a group of all the people.

Interviewer: You mean a group chat of all the people I interview?

Participant: Yes and then maybe some activity. Or you do some activities with them.

Interviewer: You mean like an after-work meeting activity for everyone?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: And you think that would be helpful for this?

Participant: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Alright, then thank you very much for sharing your experience.

Interview 8

(Wanted to see questions on screen.)

Interviewer: So my goal with this interview is to get insight into the virtual teams between Germans and Japanese and once I finished my thesis and everything I can also provide the finished thesis to MBJ and maybe it helps. Ok, so first of all how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and what are usually the reasons?

Participant: Twice or three times a week and the reason is usually to proceed with the project.

Interviewer: So the twice or three times a week is the direct telco, but you also write a lot of emails and things like that?

Participant: Yeah so basically every day.

Interviewer: Ok, and before there is a telco or video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself and also colleagues for the telco?

Participant: Check the minutes and get some agenda before the telco and check the task list about what we should do in the telco.

Interviewer: Ok and the next question would be during the telco what do you observe that Germans sometimes don't understand?

Participant: Germans... From the business point of view the German organisation and the Japanese organisation is completely different, so they usually don't know our specific business style or some topics.

Interviewer: Ok, and now the other way round what do you think that Japanese people sometimes do not understand about the Germans when they work in a virtual team?

Participant: We don't understand what they are saying (laughs). No we understand what they are saying in English but it is already translated and superficial. Sometimes if I understand some German (she speaks a little bit of German) I get to know what they really want or what they are really thinking about.

Interviewer: Ah ok, and after you had a telco with German colleagues, which issues or problems are usually discussed by your Japanese colleagues first? Like when you

finish the telco you often talk to colleagues a lot and what are usually the things that you need to talk about?

Participant: Yeah usually we do that (laughs), if some topics are not going well or if we don't have the same understanding.

Interviewer: So you mean some of your colleagues have a different understanding after the telco than you for example and then you discuss about that?

Participant: Yes. Because the telco is conducted in English, at MBJ many colleagues can speak English and understand what the telco was about or also understand and can explain what they do, however the level is different. I have little vocabulary so I cannot explain very directly or precisely.

Interviewer: It is always easier to communicate in your mother tongue. I also speak better German than English. What is your idea of leadership in a virtual team and what do you think is a good leader in this setting?

Participant: It is what I have to do (laughs).

Interviewer: Also for example in the FIMS project, if you see the project leaders what do you think they are doing well and what do you think is important for a leader to be a good leader?

Participant: Involve members and ask each member to give their input. Not the strong leadership but asking and involving and arranging.

Interviewer: Yes, and now if you were the leader in this setting with Germans and Japanese in a virtual team, how would you run the meetings and what would you do differently or similar?

Participant: Sorry I don't get the point. What's the difference?

Interviewer: The first means what a good leader in a virtual team is and the second is more about what you would do differently than the leaders of the virtual teams you are in. It is very similar but not the same.

Participant: To get everyone involved the leader has to show a common goal to everyone. Good leadership also shows the milestones and achievements to all members.

Interviewer: Ok, so the next question would be what should German colleagues know about the company processes and procedures in Japan that might be different than in Germany?

Participant: We are using different IT systems and the process how to sell a vehicle in Japan is also very different than in Germany.

Interviewer: Alright, and which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: From my point of view the email and telco are both very important. A combination is the best, because only the verbal communication will lead to some misunderstanding, but if we use email we can get the same understanding and confirmation. This is very important in the international communication.

Interviewer: OK, so if there is a new German team member in your virtual team, how can this new member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: From my point of view, greeting, welcoming and get understanding for the Japanese colleagues. Take care of deadlines and communicate as soon as possible if problems arise.

Interviewer: Ok, so the next question is, you know I am from Germany what do you think I am blind to in Japan? So what do you think I don't know about Japanese people in general? Or what is special about Japanese people that maybe German people or me don't know?

Participant: Honestly speaking I don't know how much you know about Japanese because we don't talk about that so much, but we talk everyday

Interviewer: It doesn't necessarily need to be me, but also in general what is maybe special for the Japanese culture or for the Japanese people that might be different than in other cultures for example Germany. What maybe some Germans don't know and may be interesting to know for them?

Participant: In Germany do you also say Otsukaresama?

Interviewer: Usually we say good morning and bye.

Participant: (Laughs) Yeah so I think being polite.

Interviewer: So you mean that there is a big focus on being polite in Japan that might be different than in other cultures?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, what else do you think I should ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team?

Participant: I think we need language topic.

Interviewer: You mean what language difficulties people face and how those could be addressed?

Participant: Yes, and in a telco usually the project lead presents the topic and in the end we can ask questions, but in Europe or America if people have a question they

cut in. But for us we are members of Daimler so we Japanese have to cut in (laughs) otherwise we are not involved.

Interviewer: So this is maybe also something to know for the leader. To give the Japanese time and room to ask their questions so they don't have to cut in. Alright and is there anything else apart from that, that you want to mention for this topic?

Participant: That would be all from my side, but I am very interested in your opinion especially on what would be a good leadership for virtual teams.

(Was very interested in my opinion on most of the questions after the interview.)

Interview 9

Interviewer: Basically my thesis is about virtual teams between Germans and Japanese and how they work together and about problems that occur from cultural differences or things like that and how we can improve the teamwork between Germans and Japanese and once I finished my research I will also provide the thesis to MBJ. So first of all how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and usually for what reasons?

Participant: What exactly is a virtual team?

Interviewer: Basically it means just that you mainly have contact with the others in a virtual way like telcos or video conference or email.

Participant: Ah ok this is meant by virtual team. So, very often, every day, because my colleague is working at HQ and I always communicate if I received a certain request or for a consultation for a certain department. Often I can answer those requests myself but sometimes I have to ask some German colleagues. And also once a month I have a telco with my supervisor. I am in charge of not only capacities but also financial services, I work as part of a dual assignment, so I also have contact with the financial service department at HQ.

Interviewer: Ah ok, and usually before you have a telco or a video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself and your colleagues for the telco?

Participant: Prior to the telco, if I ask them to attend the telco I share the agenda and also the materials prior to the telco and I mention points for example: "during the telco I like to get an answer from you about xyz."

Interviewer: Alright, and during a telco what do you sometimes observe that the Germans don't really understand?

Participant: Not really “not understand” but there are some differences. I don’t know if that is a reason why they don’t understand, but we use skype and some tools for telco and for me as typical Japanese I try to connect everything prior to the telco, but sometimes German persons say we can’t here you, sometimes accidents happen and then we just use the normal phone for the telco. But in Japan such things never occurred.

Interviewer: Oh ok interesting, and if you turn this around what do you think the Japanese don’t understand about Germans?

Participant: German process, values and what to consider is similar to Japan, I think more than Italy or American (laughs). This is my feeling, but sometimes there are slight differences. Sometimes Japanese supervisor instructs me what to do and if I have a question and wonder if this is correct or not I tell them prior to a meeting. For Germans if they have objections they just tell right away.

Interviewer: I see. And after the telco with German colleagues what are usually some things that are discussed by you and your Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: Depends on the situation, but this is a German company so most Germans work closer to the top management. Here it is local market and if we should decide something here it usually is already more or less decided by them. Then those are some things we might talk about after the telco. But it depends on the case not always.

Interviewer: Ok, if you were the team leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese how would you run the meetings and what would you do differently than the team leader of the team you are currently in? Or what is your general idea of a good leader in this setting?

Participant: Maybe I would take the part of a facilitator not a leader. Because I think the Germans have an opinion and also the Japanese have an opinion and as a leader it is my job to get those opinions.

Interviewer: So you would very much focus on getting everyone involved and getting the opinion of everyone?

Participant: Yes, yes.

Interviewer: Ok, what is something that German colleagues should know about company processes and procedures in Japan?

Participant: Prior to taking action Japanese prepare information sharing to related persons. For example Germans of course they send an email to all of them at first to get an opinion from them. But Japanese before they send such an email they go to the related persons and explain everything to them face to face and after that they will send the email. That is very important for Japanese.

Interviewer: So basically, before you send out an important email or a decision you align everyone and ask everyone what they think about it?

Participant: Yes, is it ok for you... and if no then we don't send the email.

Interviewer: Ok, which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Difficult, of course prior to a telco we would like to get some material and a reason why we have this telco and we like a clear statement what it is that they would want from the Japanese colleagues. Such kind of things we would like to have prior to the telco.

Interviewer: Ah ok, if there would be a new German team member in your virtual team how could this new member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Difficult (laughs), at first give their name. The name is very important in Japan and also the san.

Interviewer: So introducing themselves and being respectful about the tradition and addressing people with –san?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, so I am German, what do you think I am blind to in Japan?

Participant: Hmm??

Interviewer: Or in other words, if someone from Germany comes to Japan, what do they not realize about Japanese culture?

Participant: You know?

Interviewer: I know a little bit but pretty sure not everything.

Participant: For example what did you realize?

Interviewer: I realized that Japanese are very polite and usually a little more reserved. The politeness is obviously in speaking but also in bowing and those kind of things. That is one example I guess, but that is something that you can realize pretty quickly because you can see it. But there is probably things that are a little more hidden about Japanese culture that you don't see at first. Do you have an example for this maybe?

Participant: For example as you know maybe the Japanese person is very shy. And a lot of persons are not that familiar with English or German or foreign languages, but if somebody lost their way and asks a person for the way in English maybe they hesitate a little because they worry about not being able to explain correctly.

Interviewer: I also realized that a lot of people, even though they speak English pretty well, still hesitate because they maybe are not very confident in their English.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Ok, is there anything that you think I should ask you or other colleagues about working with Germans in virtual teams?

Participant: No, but I think Japanese should learn from German, because their culture is a little bit different. For example if you have a baby, the baby is sleeping in the room alone and you maybe put a camera to see the baby. Also at night. But in Japan people are always sleeping like mother -> baby -> father in the same room. Very weird relationship and in Germany very dry relationship. In Japan there is a separation between inside, like family and close friends, and outside. In Germany it is more like individual and others.

Interviewer: So you mean in Japan you have a strong difference between how you are inside and how you present yourself to the outside and in German the person inside and outside are very similar, is that what you mean?

Participant: Yes. In Germany it is individual and public and in Japan it is family and others.

Interviewer: So in Japan you don't really have a sense of individuality more like family?

Participant: Yes. So teamwork is very very important when you do work and Germans put more focus on individual, like an individual career is more important than the company's success, but Japanese put a lot of focus on teamwork for the company's success and not consider the individual career. I think more Japanese should learn from this.

Interviewer: I think everyone should learn from everyone.

Participant: Yes of course! But this is a little difference I found.

Interviewer: And is there anything else that you would like to mention?

Participant: No that's all.

Interviewer: Then thank you very much.

Interview 10

Interviewer: So with these interviews I try to discover how to improve the communication and the virtual teamwork between people in Germany and Japan and

once I finished my thesis I will provide it to MJB as well. So first of all how often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and usually for what reasons?

Participant: Since the 3 or 4 months I am in this department I had direct communication with colleagues from Germany a few times. They implemented a new system for this department and during the set up I wanted to get to know how everything works and also to be able to solve problems that could occur and also I keep the German colleagues updated on this project.

Interviewer: So the reason is basically knowledge sharing and status updates between HQ and your department?

Participant: Yes. And also another occasion is we had urgent issues about the owner's manual for vehicles. There are new functions implemented in Japan but the owner's manual did not have any description on them, so we contacted the person in charge at HQ urgently how to solve and proceed with this issue.

Interviewer: Ok, if you have a telco or video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself and your colleagues for it?

Participant: I summarize what I want to inform or convey.

Interviewer: Ok, and during the telco with German colleagues is there something you observed that Germans sometimes do not really understand?

Participant: I have one thing as an example. As I said there is a new system implemented and we had a different process compared to the rest of the world, because of the special language Japanese and therefore we had an issue and that's why the Japanese owner's manual is printed in Japan. And they didn't really understand what the problem was.

Interviewer: And if you look at it the other way round is there also something that you or Japanese colleagues sometimes do not really understand about the German colleagues?

Participant: Often we don't really know everything that is going on behind. Because we just see a small part of the process in the end but there is a very big process that comes before everything at HQ that we don't even see.

Interviewer: Ok, and after you finished the telco with German colleagues what are some of the issues that are usually discussed by you and your Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: Hmm, I don't see any.

Interviewer: So after you finished the telco what do you usually do afterwards with your colleagues?

Participant: Normally we share what we understood during the conversation and then if there is something missing or there is a different understanding somewhere, we try to clarify.

Interviewer: Ok, if you were the team leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese in your team, how would you run the meetings or is there maybe something you would do differently than the leader of the teams you are currently in? Or basically how would you define a good leader in the virtual team setting?

Participant: So let me see, first of all it is very important that everyone is on the same page. The premises and the issues should be very clear to everybody.

Interviewer: So for you it is very important to align everyone so that everyone is on the same page...

Participant: Yes before any discussion.

Interviewer: Ok, what is something that German colleagues should know about company processes and procedures in Japan?

Participant: For example, when we are translating. Japanese is a very difficult language and some words are very different than in other languages and they should know how difficult it is to translate to Japanese and how long it takes. Also in treasury there are a lot of differences between the financial institutions and systems.

Interviewer: Yes, ok. Which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Normally email but sometimes verbal communication is important to understand correctly.

Interviewer: And when do you prefer which?

Participant: For normal communication email is ok, but if something important is happening then email is not enough this should be done by verbal communication.

Interviewer: Ok, and if there would be a new German virtual team member in your team how could this new member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: They should show respect to others and hear about others opinion first and then they can raise their opinion.

Interviewer: Ok, you know I am German what is something I am blind to in Japan?

Participant: Blind means...?

Interviewer: That I don't see or know about Japanese culture or anything in Japan. It doesn't have to necessarily be me it could also be someone who is coming to Japan

from Germany what is maybe something that they don't see at first about Japanese and Japanese culture?

Participant: Not sure, but normally people say that the Japanese colleagues are very silent and that means they don't really have an opinion, but that is not true.

Interviewer: So if a Japanese person doesn't state their opinion directly it does not mean that they don't have an opinion but more that they are maybe a little shy or more respectful.

Participant: More respectful. But in general that is something we need to change in the global communication.

Interviewer: Depends I think everyone should try and adapt to each other. Is there anything else that I should ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team?

Participant: Not only for Germans but in general I think it is very important to respect each other, respect each other's opinion and be aware of the cultural background.

Interviewer: Ok, or maybe is there any question that you expected me to ask you that I didn't ask?

Participant: No, nothing.

Interviewer: Ok, is there anything else regarding this topic that you think should be mentioned?

Participant: Can I ask something? Do you see any difference between the culture of Germans and Japanese?

Interviewer: Yes. There are some differences I think.

(Proceed to chat a little about opinion of the interviewer)

Interview 11

Interviewer: I will later anonymize this interview. Thank you for participating and sharing your experience of working in virtual teams with me. So let's start with the first question: How often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and for what reasons usually?

Participant: Twice a week.

Interviewer: And what are the reasons?

Participant: One is with an employee who is located at HQ in Germany and one is located at the IT section in Germany that involves the call centres. So the IT person is solving most of the issues we have and we also communicate with the other person to update them on what's going on and sometimes we have a telco with everyone together. So everyone knows what's going on.

Interviewer: So the main reason is alignment?

Participant: Yes, alignment and updating and there is quite a few issues IT wise and the telco is easier to resolve those issues than with email all the time.

Interviewer: Ok, and before the telco with German colleagues how do you prepare yourself and colleagues for it?

Participant: I don't know how the Germans prepare it, but from a Japanese point of view we find it easier to have a set agenda, so not just speaking about what comes to mind but we have topics in a very simple table with the agenda and also what was spoken about in the last telco and then we just take it from there. Before the telco starts if someone has a new topic or an update they want to speak about we update this table and then the table gets spread around, which I think the Germans prefer as well rather than talking about random things all over the place.

Interviewer: Ok, and during the telco what do you sometimes observe that the Germans don't understand?

Participant: Surprisingly, if from the Japanese side the English level is reasonably good, I haven't seen many issues or blockages in the communication alone. I think the place where there is an issue is if there is an issue that involves a person that is not present Japanese people will still take the problem because it is about Mercedes Benz Japan, whereas with Germans if you bring up an issue that does not involve the person you are speaking to the German person will tell you straight away you can't bring this problem up with me because it is not my responsibility. Maybe it would be better if you take this problem to xyz who is in charge of such issues. That is a place where there sometimes is an issue because when a Japanese person takes an issue to a German person they expect the German person to take that issue and find the person responsible to solve it, but that's now how it works.

Interviewer: Ok, so you already talked about my next question as well a bit, because it is kind of the other way round, so what do you think the Japanese do not understand about Germans?

Participant: So yeah that is basically it, but it might be better for the communication if the Japanese colleagues don't take any issues that are not involving themselves and be more specific about saying that is not my responsibility. So then the problem can be directed to the person responsible and be resolved faster.

Interviewer: Ok, and after a telco with German colleagues which issues are usually discussed by Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: Ok as you maybe know, the Japanese even though their processes are longer and their way is maybe a bit slower, because they work longer hours they do get things sorted out and they do issues and problems get worked on quite fast, whereas the frustration comes when maybe on the German counterpart's side even though the processes are a lot faster and they are a lot more efficient maybe because their working hours are a lot shorter and the working days are not as much, from the Japanese perspective it comes off as if the work is being done slow. But the work is actually not done slow it is just done in a different manner. So I think that is one issue that the Japanese find. It is just two different working styles.

Interviewer: Ok, so if you were the leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese how would you run the meetings and what would you do differently?

Participant: What I would do if I was the leader before the team even has their first regular telco or anything it is required for everyone to meet personally one to one, which means either send the Japanese part to Germany or have the Germans visit Japan. I think that helps a lot, I have been in Telcos where the participants have not met and then they met and after they met the communication for some reason improves. I don't know if it is because you recognize a voice that you have heard before or why that is exactly. That is number one and number two, I think from the start it should be discussed openly about the frequency of the Telcos because often some topics take some time to be resolved and then there is no need for a weekly telco if the topic takes one month to resolve.

Interviewer: Ok, so what is something that German colleagues should know about company processes and procedures in Japan that they might be not aware of?

Participant: I think often times, because in Japanese companies everyone is very hierarchy-based, it means that if you speak to a normal employee, even if this employee is responsible for a the issue you are talking about, because Japan is very hierarchy-based, everything needs to be reported back to the manager. So that takes time, it is just the way things are done. So even though person A is responsible they have to report to person B and person B needs confirmation by person C before they can report back to person A and then person A can solve the issue.

Interviewer: So which communication methods do you and Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Even though we say these things about Japanese working culture and German working culture at the end of the day I think it still matters how the individual works, because I have seen in some occasions where we do weekly telcos, but one week it is cancelled and then the updates are done just through email and it works just as well. I think again it needs to be set out clearly whether the telco is necessary on a weekly basis or if simple updates can be done in form of a list via email.

Interviewer: So you think the communication method depends a lot on the situation?

Participant: Yes, the situation and also the individual how they prefer it.

Interviewer: Ok, so if there was a new German team member in the virtual team, how could this new person earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?

Participant: Probably pay a lot of attention to timing and preparation, by that I mean being aware of what you have to prepare on your side before the telco. I think if there was a problem that should be resolved by the German team member even if it could not be solved before the telco, if you can show you are working on it and show them maybe a status update it is fine but if you come unprepared then the trust might be lost.

Interviewer: You know I am from Germany, what do you think I am blind to in Japan?

Participant: (Laughs) I think maybe you might not be aware that the work culture is more similar than you might think it is on first glance. As I said preparation, timing all these kind of things, as much as it is important in Germany it is important to Japanese people as well, which is why it works well as compared to other cultures where the relationship is more important than if you are on time or prepared. In some cultures as long as you like the person you may work longer hours.

Interviewer: So you think that for me or also for other Germans that come to Japan they might be too much focused on the differences and not see the similarities between the different working styles.

Participant: Exactly.

Interviewer: Ok, is there anything else that you think I should ask you or Japanese colleagues about working in virtual teams with Germans?

Participant: You asked many questions about what Germans should be aware of when working with Japanese maybe you should also ask what Japanese should be aware of when working with Germans, that might help the Japanese people as well.

Interviewer: Ok, and is there anything else you would like to mention regarding this topic that has not been mentioned yet?

Participant: No I think I mentioned everything.

Interview 12

Interviewer: Thank you very much for sharing your experience with me. With this interview or with my thesis in general I try to get to know the communication between people in Germany and in Japan a little more and once I finished my research and my thesis I will also provide the thesis and everything to MJB so maybe it helps. So

let's start. How often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and what are usually the reasons?

Participant: Virtual teams means project or?

Interviewer: Yes like project teams that communicate with each other virtually a lot like emails and telcos and not meeting a lot face to face.

Participant: So mainly I think half of my emails is communicating with Germany and of course the FIMS project and MBC and also the Command system which is an infotainment system and also driver assistance. So mainly 4 fields I communicate with the German team.

Interviewer: So you have 4 topics and you basically communicate with them every day?

Participant: Almost every day.

Interviewer: And the reasons are obviously because they are the project leaders right?

Participant: Yes. And also I need to handle all the product topics. Of course one thing is always questions to the HQ to clarify anything but also product features and prize and things like that. On the other hand they are always asking me what is the requirement or demand from Japan so therefore I will align internally at MBJ and give the feedback to them.

Interviewer: Ok, so basically the main reason is to report back to HQ.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: And before you have a telco or video conference with German colleagues how do you usually prepare yourself and your colleagues for it?

Participant: I think it is not different for the telco with Germany and a meeting in Japan. Because I have just prepared what I should say or if I am the coordinator of the meeting I have to prepare all of the agenda and also ask the participants if they have anything to address for the meeting.

Interviewer: Ok, and during a telco what do you observe that Germans sometimes do not understand?

Participant: (Laughs) Of course, first of all the Japanese colleagues sometimes are not very good at speaking English, so of course for the more technical things the ability for English is sometimes not good enough from Japanese colleagues. This is of course often an issue. And a second issue is that Germany and Japan is a great distance apart so the mind is always different before the meeting because in Japan we can align with everyone before the meeting but with Germany we only have email

contact or sometimes telco with voice therefore the mind-set might be somehow different.

Interviewer: Interesting, and now the other way round what do you think Japanese people do not understand about Germans?

Participant: (Laughs) ...

Interviewer: Or what do you specifically sometimes wonder?

Participant: So of course technical things, Germans like to use abbreviations for technical things and I sometimes don't know those abbreviations it's of course a technical thing. And for the more mind-set point of view, from my point of view because I have lived in Germany before...

Interviewer: You don't have any trouble?

Participant: Yes normally not.

Interviewer: Ok, and after you have done a telco with German colleagues what are usually some issues that are discussed by you and your Japanese colleagues first?

Participant: Of course they are Daimler and we are MBJ, so in order to negotiate with Daimler we at MBJ need to align all the opinions, but sometimes before the meeting if I or some other colleagues cannot align their opinion with other colleagues sometimes issues are happening because some colleagues are saying different things during the telco with Germany so it's always an issue and after the meeting in Japan we normally talk in Japanese to align.

Interviewer: So you try to have one strong opinion everyone together and if that is not possible then sometimes there are issues.

Participant: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer: Ok and what is your idea of leadership in a virtual team? How would you define a good leader in this setting?

Participant: Ok, so I have joined in the leadership 2020 project in overseas so in this team we have 7 colleagues from all over the world and sometimes it is hard to discuss everything because everyone has their own job in their own country and it is difficult to decide one thing during the telco. But I think that strong leadership would be to make the mind-set always positive for anything, because if the mind-set becomes negative nothing can be achieved in the team. But of course in the virtual team making the mind-set or the atmosphere positive is sometimes difficult, but a somehow a good leader can achieve that even just by voice.

Interviewer: Ok, and if you personally would be the leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese how would you run the meetings and what things would you maybe do differently than you experience it in your meetings?

Participant: Ok so always at first breaking the ice is an important thing so maybe I would start with a joke that can be understood by Germans and Japanese, that is always a difficult thing because maybe in Japan the joke is funny but in Germany the joke is not funny.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Ok, what should German colleagues maybe know about company processes and procedures in Japan?

Participant: Oh, so for MBJ, MBJ and Daimler is different, because in Daimler they have many colleagues there so they always have a specific field which they should take care of but in MBJ we have very limited resources in the company so every colleague should take care of a wide field in the country, so that is always the difference from Germany and Japan and also in terms of the customer our mind is always to treat the customer as a god in Japan so therefore it is also sometimes different from the German thinking, because we always have customer issues which we report to Daimler and say fix that as soon as possible, but from Daimler's point of view that is not a big issue for them, but you know in Japan the customer who is buying Mercedes is always rich people and they are sometimes very demanding.

Interviewer: Ok, so which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?

Participant: Ok like a telco or?

Interviewer: Yes, like telco or email or video conference.

Participant: Yes all the tools have good things and bad things for each of them, but for email of course it is easy to spread the information with every colleague, but sometimes the information that is within the email is less than in a telco. In order to design something at first I prefer telco or video conference, but of course email is also important. And recently also chat via app has become more important. Of course the info included in the chat is very limited but in order to contact someone urgently it is very useful.

Interviewer: So you think it just depends on what your goal is.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Then, if there is a new German team member in your virtual team how can this new team member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues quickly?

Participant: Of course some German colleagues are ignoring our emails very frequently, so of course in order to trust in anything you should reply to emails as soon as possible and of course from Daimler's point of view always China USA first, Germany Europe first and then Japan and Korea, but if the German colleague can make the Japanese colleagues feel that Japan is important for the German colleagues I think they can get some trust from the colleagues.

Interviewer: Ok, so you know I am German what do you think I am blind to in Japan, what do you think I don't see that is typical for Japan?

Participant: You don't see?

Interviewer: Like from the mind-set point of view what do you think I don't see or understand about the people in Japan?

Participant: Japanese people have the culture which is called "sasuru" which means think about other people's mind I think for German people they always try to inform their mind and opinion to other colleagues but in Japan sometimes I don't need to say it because everyone should understand from the atmosphere. I think that is difficult to understand for German colleagues. I don't know because I am not German.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Ok, what else do you think I should ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in virtual teams?

Participant: Hmm.

Interviewer: Or generally is there anything else you find worth mentioning for this topic?

Participant: No not really, I already mentioned everything.

Appendix C: Structured Interview Results

Question	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6	Participant 7	Participant 8	Participant 9	Participant 10	Participant 11	Participant 12
How often do you participate in virtual teams with Germans and for what reasons?	Monthly	3-5 times a month	twice a month, and a two week audit per year	Weekly	Daily	Weekly	Daily	Daily	Daily	Monthly	Twice a week	Daily
Reasons for virtual team?	Contact with overseas team and logistics	Reporting and alignment	Reporting and budget decisions	Project implementation	Boss is German and German counterpart	Project implementation	Reporting back and implementation	Project implementation	Communication with colleagues	Knowledge sharing and reporting back	Alignment and updating	Project work and alignment
Before a telco or video conference with German colleagues, how do you prepare yourself and your colleagues for it?	Prepare relevant material, check Agenda	Colleague prepared the telco	Check agenda and prepare questions	Gather feedback and summarize into an agenda for the meeting	Prepare questions and give reason for a telco	Check agenda and try to clarify questions in advance	Send agenda	Check minutes, agenda and task list	Share agenda and materials	Summarize issues	Prepare agenda	Prepare agenda and possible questions
During a telco what do you sometimes observe that Germans do not understand?	Language issues	Give very direct answers (although a more detailed answer was expected)	Different reasoning, MBJ is smaller	Don't know about the circumstances in Japan very well (less employees)	If someone asks difficult to understand questions there are issues	General misunderstandings	Japanese customer is very different from German customer	German and Japanese organisation is very different	Lots of technical difficulties	Japanese language issues	Japanese people tend to take issues further them to responsible persons even if it is not their responsibility	Language issues, and time difference (Japanese have time to prepare and align Germans basically just woke up)
What do you think the Japanese do not understand about the Germans?	Language issues	Different communication styles	Stickiness with timelines, wording and attitude	Some decisions by HQ are not really explained	Direct communication	X	Germans have a lot of holiday	Mostly language issues	If a German does not agree with something they will tell right away	Don't understand everything that is going on behind the scenes	s.o.	Germans often use abbreviations
After a telco with German colleagues, which issues are usually discussed by your Japanese colleagues first?	Alignment and then send answers to Germans	Germans only answer the question asked with usually one sentence	Take notes and inform manager	Align how to use the German system	Align the understanding of the telco and clarify issues	Align and get everyone on the same page	Discussing if everyone go the same message and then send a unified message to Germany	Check if everyone got the same understanding and align	Talk about decisions from the telco	Alignment and clarification	Different working styles	Alignment
Which communication methods do you and your Japanese colleagues prefer in a virtual team setting and why?	telco, because presentation function is very useful	Depends, complicated thing -> telco, quick question -> email	Short messaging, it is easy direct response and you have evidence	telco, because it is difficult to discuss with several people about one thing via email	Direct communication, like telcos	Email, because you have evidence and can document it better	Email to avoid misunderstanding	Combination of telco and email	Depends, email and telco are both important	Normal communication: email something important, telco	Depends more on the individual and the project	Depends on the topic
If you were the team leader of a virtual team with Germans and Japanese how would you run the meetings? What would you do differently?	Knowledge sharing and relationship building between departments	Be aware of cultural backgrounds, but don't focus too much on it	Meet face to face at least once, use screen sharing and video conference if possible to see who is speaking	Make it clear why there is a meeting and don't stick to your personal opinion	Prepare clear discussion points and give a purpose for the meeting	Leader should be more of a moderator, everybody should be involved and have a proactive mind	Face to face time, diversity and trust	Involve everyone and get everyone's opinion, show achievements	Be a facilitator and get everyone involved	Everyone should be on the same page	Meet face to face once, be open about the need for telcos	create a positive atmosphere, breaking the ice
What should German colleagues know about company processes and procedures in Japan?	Japanese timelines	Before important meetings, they have a dinner and decide everything there	Business model of MBJ, more information is needed not just decisions	In meetings Japanese tend to not discuss because usually issues are decided before the meeting	Pretty similar, both like to follow rules	Legal topics and topics related to Japanese culture	Japanese customers complain a lot	Different IT systems and process how to sell a car is different in Japan	Before taking action Japanese first align everyone involved and ask if everyone is ok with it	Different financial institutions, translating to Japanese takes a lot of time	Japan is very hierarchy based so to get a decision usually takes longer	Different company size so one person has a lot more responsibilities, different customers
How does a new German virtual team member earn the trust and respect of Japanese colleagues?	Learn some of the polite greetings, respect the culture	Know the team and what has been discussed so far	Structured conversation and use easy English	Hear about everyone's opinion first and then give own opinion	Prepare well and do your job	Good communication skills not only for the project	Go drinking and have private conversations	Be polite, take care of deadlines and communicate problems early	Remember names and address people with san	Show respect and hear about other opinions first	Timing and preparation	Reply to emails quickly and make them feel important
You know I come from Germany, what am I blind to in Japan?	Different politeness levels in the language	Japanese politeness is exaggerated by foreigners	People in Japan tend to be very indirect	Japanese people tend to not show personal feelings to others very much	You need to have good Japanese friends	If your task includes dealing with Japanese you should know a bit about Japanese culture	Japanese people are shy and insecure about their English ability	The Japanese focus on being polite	Japanese are very shy	Japanese people tend to be more silent because they want to be respectful	Work culture is more similar than you think	"Sasaru" think about other people's mind
What else should I ask you or your colleagues about working with Germans in a virtual team?	X	Ask some direct questions about things I have personally encountered	Would be curious about the other way round (interviewing Germans)	X	X	X	Create a group for all the interview participants and do some after work activity	Topic about language difficulties	X	X	Ask the other way round (interviewing Germans)	X
Is there anything else that you would like to mention regarding this topic or anything else that you noticed when working with Germans?	Impressed by German presentation skills and detailed explanations	Never thought of people from DKG as Germans, just as people	Interested if it is a cultural difference or more like personal preferences	In Japan if you want to do something you first consider how it would affect everyone involved and then decide	Germans should talk more about emotional and private things	X	X	Japanese people don't like to cut in during a discussion	In Germany it is individual and public and in Japan it is family and others	(Interested in my point of view)	X	X